

5-2015

Conspicuous Consumers: the Victorian Department Store and the Women's Movement

Joslyn McCraw VonKaenel
Clemson University

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CONSPICUOUS CONSUMERS: THE VICTORIAN DEPARTMENT STORE AND
THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
English

by
Joslyn McCraw VonKaenel
May 2015

Accepted by:
Dr. David Coombs, Committee Chair
Dr. Kimberly Manganelli
Dr. Erin Goss

ABSTRACT

This project involves examining the influence of the department store and other Victorian inventions on women's rights. By analyzing the works of Elizabeth Gaskell, Emile Zola, George Gissing, and Amy Levy, I explore the different representations of shopgirls and consumers in nineteenth century fiction and how they connect to modern women in the online community.

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CONSPICUOUS CONSUMERS: THE VICTORIAN DEPARTMENT STORE AND THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT

In 1838, Aristide Boucicaut founded Le Bon Marché, France's first department store, which completely changed the way items were marketed, created some of the first jobs for women, and inspired novels like Emilé Zola's *Au Bonheur des Dames*. Shops like Boucicaut's created jobs for a new class of middle-class women; this gave many of them financial independence for the first time. Department stores also resulted in rising tension as the lines dividing both financial and social classes became unclear. In late nineteenth-century Britain, women could own property once they were married; they could also get divorced, go to college, and work in a limited number of positions. Having the ability to earn their own income was one of the biggest accomplishments of the women's rights movement, as financially independent women could support themselves rather than having to rely on a husband. As more women left the home to work or to shop, Victorian culture quickly began to define the independence and image of the New Woman. Advertisements, novels, and other forms of media created conflicting messages about what the New Woman represented, which resulted in the development of many different stereotypes. In this essay, I consider the New Woman to represent either middle or upper class women who are searching for financial independence, social independence, or more ideally both.

By analyzing several works from the Victorian Era, I will examine the ways the department store created new roles for women of both upper and lower classes, how those roles affected the image of the New Woman, and how the consumerist culture of

this period continues to influence women today. First, I will investigate Elizabeth Gaskell's 1853 novel *Cranford* in order to show how women in rural areas, away from the newly emerging department stores, were affected by changes in consumerist culture. I will go on to analyze Zola's *Au Bonheur des Dames*, written in 1883. This book is based on Boucicaut's department store, and it provides an intricate description of the impact these stores played in many aspects of urban society, including women's rights. Using Gissing's *The Odd Women* and Amy Levy's *Romance of a Shop*, I will then highlight some of the less traditional literary depictions of shopgirls and how they challenge the typical representation of Victorian women at work. While the department store had a positive impact on many aspects of the women's movement, such as the creation of jobs and financial independence, I argue that it also made women vulnerable in several new ways. For instance, the practices of conspicuous consumption these stores encouraged ultimately expanded the gap between different financial classes to the point that women were unable to remain unified in their goals toward gender equality. Department stores also cultivated a negative stereotype surrounding the shopgirl and further perpetuated the myth that women need men (typically husbands) to "save" them from the drudgeries of working for themselves, which affected their social reputations. I will go on to show how this process has repeated with each new wave of the women's movement.

In the 1950s, women were encouraged to return to the home following World War Two and the invention of many household appliances. Shortly after, Betty Freidan identified the many negative consequences this renewed form of gender-specific

advertising had on women's rights and roles within the home. By looking at how the creation of online shopping is affecting women once again, I hope to encourage a new level of awareness of the ways in which consumerism has hindered feminist progress in the past and the hazards it carries with it in today's rapidly expanding digital culture.

When department stores were first invented, urban life was drastically altered as consumers were given an increasing number of options to purchase at prices lower than most small-business owners could offer. Once women realized that they could afford to shop more often and buy larger quantities of goods, the term conspicuous consumption, or the expenditure on "luxuries on a lavish scale in an attempt to enhance one's prestige," became common (OED, 1889). As businesses grew, storeowners began developing different methods of advertising. These tactics were primarily aimed at the women who frequented their stores, and stereotypes soon began to develop depicting what the male employers thought women would best respond to. Although women were experiencing freedom in many new ways, these advertisements affected their views of themselves and other women, ultimately creating a further divide between classes and competition amongst those in the same class. Some magazines would feature pictures of women staring into a mirror admiring their new items. However, smaller, rural towns were not as severely affected by these problems, as they did not have direct access to the latest fashions. Elizabeth Gaskell's novel, *Cranford*, demonstrates the ways in which areas outside of London and Paris were able to resist the draw of newly emerging department stores, but they were still faced with the problem of redefining their perception of the different types of social and financial classes.

Gaskell's novel represents the early ways in which women were able to maintain their independence and some of the drawbacks. *Cranford* first appeared as a series of sketches in a magazine, and it "has been popular ever since its first appearance as a sixteen-chapter book in June 1853" (Chapple, 7-8). Some of the first women's magazines were being produced during this time, and many readers looked to the stories, articles and advertisements and guidance on how to act in a time when they were beginning to develop new rights. Mary Smith, the story's young narrator carefully describes the customs and idiosyncrasies of the spinsters of Cranford that she is able to observe on her many visits. The women of Cranford are fiercely independent from men. While they do not hesitate to call on each other in the case of an emergency, they avoid associating with the opposite sex whenever possible. This becomes increasingly evident when either Captain Brown or Signor Brunoni is in town. The women spend much of their time criticizing their manner or blaming them for robberies, but they eventually acknowledge that both men are more than admirable. Their initial reluctance to trust men that have entered into Cranford society demonstrates how little they need them. However, many of the town's residents rely on small incomes they inherited from their parents, forcing them to be frugal while still keeping up appearances of moderate wealth.

There is an understanding of "elegant economy" that the women of Cranford practice in order to avoid unnecessary extravagance (Gaskell, 3). Each town member has her one particularly obsessive practice that she believes will save money. Miss Jenkins will only burn one candlestick at a time for light in the evening; in order to keep both of her candles at the same height (should a neighbor drop in unexpectedly), she frequently

changes which candle is lit. Other town members cannot stand to waste butter, getting angry with residents who waste an extra pat on their pastry during afternoon tea. Even Mary Smith admits to an obsession of tirelessly collecting small scraps of string. By demonstrating the necessity to save money on small items like these, Gaskell shows that most of the town's residents are not rich enough to buy new dresses or other clothes on a regular basis. However, the one luxury they each insist upon are the newest caps. Mary Smith states: "If the heads were buried in smart new caps, the ladies were like ostriches, and cared not what became of their bodies" (73). Everyone in Cranford is constantly asking about the latest style of caps in London, particularly what the Queen is wearing. Miss Matty is extremely disappointed when Mary Smith does not bring her a turban because she believed it to be the latest style. It could be argued that the characters' concern over this one item indicates the reach of the department store; however, their desire for pretty caps does not overshadow their concern for one another. While later novels, like Zola's *Au Bonheur des Dames*, exhibit few harmonious relationships between women of different classes or financial backgrounds, Gaskell shows throughout her novel that women can be kind to one another regardless of how much money they have. Still, there is a struggle in Cranford over the importance of one's social class. This stems primarily from Mrs. Jamieson, who is considered the highest-ranking member of the town both socially and financially.

There are several moments when Gaskell challenges the significance of both financial and social status, and she ultimately demonstrates their insignificance by forcing characters to contradict their established set of "rules" set by Mrs. Jamieson. Despite their

wide range of incomes, the residents of Cranford mostly consider themselves to be of the same social status because of the reputable families they come from. This allows the women to be friends in a way that is not present in later novels. According to Mary Smith, “Everybody lived in the same house, and wore pretty nearly the same well-preserved, old-fashioned clothes” (13). It would be difficult for an outsider to determine which residents are well-off and which are rather poor. For instance, Miss Matty and Deborah Jenkins are the daughters of the town’s former rector. However, several events occur that force the women of Cranford to choose between their imagined rules of decorum and their instinctive friendship toward one another. The most significant is Miss Matty’s misfortune. While she and her sister Deborah have a decent income for much of the novel, Miss Matty is left with only “thirteen pounds a year” after her sister’s death and an investment mishap (126). Miss Matty’s friends resolve to secretly give her money, so she can continue living in her home. Her maid, Martha, also helps her by moving into Miss Matty’s house with her new husband in order to reduce expenses. These actions indicate that the women of Cranford value friendship over social status. Still, there is an initial reluctance to support the shop Miss Matty opens until Mrs. Jamieson gives her approval.

Cranford does a thorough job of showing readers the early contradictions New Women were already facing. While the most of the women in the novel were financially independent, they still feel bound by other rules of society. The support Miss Matty’s friends initially gave her was decided upon when Mrs. Jamieson was out of town, which suggests that without the presence of a someone from a very high financial and social

background the women of Cranford do not feel as bound by their laws. It's only when Mrs. Jamieson has returned that they are uncertain of their duty. Miss Matty is still able to visit her friends and be included in town events. However, it is clear that the position of a shopgirl creates a new problem in Cranford society. The prerequisite of having Mrs. Jamieson's approval of Miss Matty's new position demonstrates an early instance of the questions brought on by the shopgirls of the late 1800s. Thankfully, even she concedes in favor of helping her friend by telling the others that Miss Matty's tea shop will not "forfeit her right to the privileges of society in Cranford" (143). It is possible that Miss Matty is only saved because her father was a rector, which commands a certain amount of respect regardless of her income, but it is possible that Mrs. Jamieson is simply willing to look past her own rules when it is for a morally sound reason.

Despite Gaskell's ability to show some of the early contradictions the New Woman faced as she gained independence, she quickly negates Miss Matty's progress in her account of the new store. Before opening her store, Miss Matty is afraid that she will offend others by her new career. The town is actually very supportive of her new shop, but the shop owner never gains any business sense or confidence in her job. She gives away a lot of her merchandise and does little to promote her business. What customers she does have are directed there by the other shop owners in town attempting to be kind. Miss Matty's inability to support herself on her own income indicates how reliant most of Cranford's residents are in the money they inherited from family members. Even Miss Betty, who used to run a small milliners shop with her sister, closed it up after the sister's death and lives off of their savings. The homecoming of Miss Matty's brother, Peter

represents a common theme that is shown again in each of the later novels mentioned in this essay: a man appears to “save” the shopgirl from working herself into financial independence. Before Miss Matty is able to adjust to her new role as a shopgirl, Peter arrives and tells her to give up her shop and let him take care of her. While this is a less typical approach than in novels where the female worker quits working because she gets married, it is still indicative of a long-standing tradition of men removing the “burden” of work from women just as they are beginning to truly understand the freedom it allows. However, Gaskell also uses Peter’s character to challenge the growing divide between classes.

While Mrs. Jamieson allows certain rules to be side-stepped when she feels the resident deserves it, Gaskell demonstrates her refusal to accept a woman actively choosing to lower her social status. When Lady Glenmire, whom they had all admired for her title earlier in the novel, marries the ordinary town doctor, Mrs. Jamieson refuses to speak to her cousin for a long time. It is not until the very end of the story that Miss Matty’s brother Peter is able to convince the two of them to settle their differences. This is not the only instance of judgment in Gaskell’s novel; Miss Pole is frequently questioning, describing, and gossiping about different things town members have done that could cause their social standing to fall. However, this is the same woman who stuck her cat in a boot in order to recover a lace collar it had eaten, so she may not be representative of the entire town’s ideals.

Cranford demonstrates the customs and values of rural areas just as department stores are beginning to develop and women are being permitted to work as shopgirls.

Gaskell is able to capture many of the early questions and contradictions Victorian women faced as the figure of the New Woman was beginning to emerge. Once the department store began to create a new type of market for upper-class women and job opportunities for lower-class women, that image became even more confusing and inconsistent. Shopgirls and conspicuous consumers are depicted differently in each of these novels: Zola's *Au Bonheur des Dames*, Gissing's *The Odd Women*, and Levy's *Romance of a Shop*. Yet, they all fail to establish female characters who are fully successful both financially and socially.

Women faced poor working conditions in both England and France until the twentieth century, but there were differences in the two regions that influence the amount of freedom each character has. Zola's novel is set in France; Gissing and Levy both set their stories in London. Lilian Furst clearly identifies the distinctive issues new women workers were facing in France with her book *L'Assommoir: A Working Woman's Life*. She claims that women workers "were beginning to increase in number as a consequence of financial pressures on the family and the changing economic structure" (4). Until divorce was legalized in France in 1884, many women were still largely present in the home taking care of children, cooking meals, and keeping house while working odd jobs to help with bills. They were trapped in the precarious position of taking on many responsibilities without having much, if any control over what type of income they earned. Furst points out that these women were "by law distinctly a second-class citizen" (5). Although Zola's novel is set in the 1860s, he is aware of the new freedoms that women were beginning to have and, in many ways, uses his characters as a way of

demonstrating the significance of those new rights. Lee Holcombe investigates the ways in which conventional representations of women were being challenged in England by the new jobs the department store and other advances were generating. Because women in London had more rights, he argues they were more aggressive with their attacks “against the ‘patriarchal ideal’ of Victorian society and the special role of domesticity and dependence, of subjection, which it assigned to the perfect woman” (3). Holcombe’s claim is demonstrated by the more confident and somewhat forceful nature of Gissing and Levy’s characters in comparison to Zola’s Denise Baudu. He also argues that at first, English women were very supportive of each other’s progress across different social classes. Holcombe cites *The English Woman’s Journal*, which tells its readers: “ladies could exercise a great influence in promoting the employment of saleswomen in shops simply by insisting that they be served by women” (103). That sense of camaraderie among women of different classes in nearly as present in Zola’s narrative, the solution is not that simple. By comparing these and other differences in the three novels, I hope to show ways in which the department store’s role affected women in both countries, and I will determine how its conception of shopgirls, advertisements, and conspicuous consumption helped shape the image of the New Woman and redefine class boundaries among Victorian women.

In Emilé Zola’s *Au Bonheur des Dames* (*The Ladies’ Paradise*), he demonstrates the ways in which different social classes were affected by the introduction of the department store and indicated many of the stereotypical figures of the New Woman that resulted. Set in the 1860s, just as the first feminist movement was beginning to take shape, *Au*

Bonheur des Dames gives a naturalist account of the impact Paris' first department store had on the public. Modeled after Le Bon Marché (the first department store in France and one of the earliest department stores in the world), its owner Octave Mouret is obsessed with creating a store that will conquer woman, which does mainly by using his business. The novel begins with a young girl named Denise Baudu, who is forced to move to Paris with her two younger brothers after the death of her father. She hopes to work for her uncle Baudu at his small shop, but the new department store has hurt her uncle's business too much for him to be able to help her. This leads Denise to apply for a position as a shopgirl at *The Ladies Paradise* where she discovers the challenges of becoming a working-woman in Victorian society just as the figure of the New Woman was attempting to be defined. Denise and the other shopgirls are overworked and underpaid, and some are even used sexually by Mouret and the male coworkers. From the beginning of the novel, Zola makes the shop owner's goal clear: "Mouret's unique passion was the conquest of Woman" (234). Mouret attempts to conquer all types of woman- from poor shopgirls to upper-class socialites- and he is usually successful. He buys out the stores of smaller business owners, forcing their daughters to apply for jobs with The Ladies Paradise. Women in higher and lower classes are all swept into Mouret's store, either for work or for products, and there is constant competition between all of them. By analyzing the popular ideals many of the novel's shopgirls subscribed to and distinguishing how Denise's experience differed, I will show that Zola intended for Denise to be a model for the potential success women could have with this new job opportunity as well as the failures and hardships that were much more common. I argue that Zola recognized both

the negative and positive effects the department store had on middle-class women and the development of the New Woman character, and he ultimately supported the new form of consumerism.

Denise is challenged throughout the novel to conform to the new society created by the department store, and both her frequent lack of financial independence and her ever-threatened virginity play a large role in her development. Other women of her class are portrayed as willing to sacrifice anything to earn money, and women of the higher class are shown to do the same for the store's products. This creates of tension between the women of the novel, as they are constantly competing against one another. Zola depicts many of the different positions that shopgirls were able to fill within a department store throughout his novel, and he also describes the various ways in which they are able to earn extra money or get promotions: typically through prostitution. Denise Baudu interacts with many different shopgirls and also male workers when she begins her job at The Ladies' Paradise. Lise Shapiro Sanders explains that shopgirls like Denise "became the figure for a contested and transitional subjectivity, a new social identity for turn-of-the-century working women" (20). She claims that Zola's novel reinforces the conventional role of the shopgirl that authors established early on, arguing that he supports the invention of the department store, despite its "crushing the small, family-owned shops which struggle in vain to compete with its superior selling power," because Denise is able to have a "largely positive experience" while working there (84). Though it is true that the heroine does eventually gain a great deal after several promotions, she suffers through a great deal of misfortune before experiencing anything good. Sanders

mentions the “lascivious inspector” that harasses Denise, but she ultimately dismisses this issue by claiming that Zola “deemphasizes this danger by then narrating the story of Denise’s increased independence and her rise to the top of the store’s hierarchy” (84). The unrelenting male attention Denise has to put up with in the novel is not something that should be so quickly overlooked because it was followed by financial success.

Denise spends much of the novel living between paychecks and barely making ends meet, but she refuses to compromise her integrity in order to earn extra income. Zola reiterates the long hours, frequent illnesses, and other difficulties the young female workers face as they are fired with little to no reason and hired back whenever it is convenient to the store. Over the course of the novel, she is scorned by her uncle Baudu for taking the job, even though he could not offer her one himself. Denise frequently sacrifices her minimal paycheck to pay for her brother’s mistakes only to have him return seeking even more money. After one of these moments, she is fired by Bourdoncle (Mouret’s right-hand man) because he does not believe the young man is her brother. She is forced to move into disreputable room with her youngest brother, who she takes care of while working odd jobs to pay their rent. Despite all of this, Denise refuses to compromise her virtue or honor, and she eventually is rehired by Mouret and promoted to head of her own department. Through this character, Zola demonstrates how working-class women could fight back against the social assumptions that department stores place on shopgirls. However, this progress is completely negated when Denise accepts Mouret’s proposal at the end of the novel.

After Denise is finally promoted to head buyer in her department, she agrees to marry Mouret. It could be argued that she is able to do so without compromising the integrity of her character because of her financial independence; however, Zola makes it clear that Mouret is a weakness of Denise's, not a source of power. Denise is clearly intelligent enough to succeed on her own, as she comes up with many of the marketing strategies that the Paradise uses to attract customers. Mouret spends much of the novel attempting to woo Denise because he recognizes her potential and possibly wants to exploit it to his full benefit. Because of the amount of business experience that Denise gains over the course of the novel (at one point she even goes to work for another shop and is able to help keep it running for a while despite the growing competition of Mouret's shop), it would not have been impossible for Zola to allow her to open her own store. Unlike Miss Matty, she is more than capable of running it herself and creating ways to compete with the Paradise. Her eventual acceptance stands out more as a symbol of compromises that New Woman characters often make. Just as Miss Matty abandoned her store when her brother returned to support her, Denise gave up her independence as soon as she is in a position of power. Rather than remaining both financially independent and morally uncompromised, she will now fill the role of his former wife. Men are not the only problem Denise faces as she tries to fight against the quickly-forming stereotypes surrounding the image of the shopgirl.

Zola is able to demonstrate how women challenged the image of the New Woman by showing the ways in which they interact with Denise throughout the novel. When she first begins her job, Denise is scrutinized and humiliated by the other shopgirls at the

Ladies Paradise. There is Madame Aurélie, who is head of the women's department and initially treats Denise poorly because she does not like her appearance; she later is afraid Denise will replace her and becomes even crueler. Other shopgirls, particularly Claire, do various passive-aggressive things in an attempt to get Denise fired; so many young girls were applying for shopgirl positions during this time because it was one of the few ways they could support themselves. Since Denise is the newest member of the staff, she has the least experience, and has not yet made any friends, which makes her an easy target. They steal customers from her and blame their own mistakes on the new girl. At first, Denise is intimidated by the girls "ladylike ways" and "airs and graces" that allow them to form "a vague class floating between the working and middle classes" (155). Zola is clearly identifying the shopgirls' attempt to represent the figure of the New Woman. However, Denise soon learns that most of the girls come from the same financial and social background (or worse) as her. They have simply learned how to hide their middle-class attributes in order to fit in with a higher society. Another reason the other shopgirls do not like her because she is unkempt and not well-spoken; this conflicts with the images of the New, middle-class woman that is being circulated in advertisements and journals during this time.

Mouret uses his deceased wife's money to help finance the department store, using the inheritance that allowed him to be financially independent to build his shop that offers a similar fate to its women workers and shoppers. Naomi Schor points out that "the store, despite all the floral extravagance of its decorations, rests on a corpse, a dead woman whose presence is never forgotten, for Octave and the reader are frequently

reminded of it” (146). She argues that the corpse of Mouret’s wife “marks Zola’s desire to broaden his social perspective and embrace the whole of socioeconomic reality through his description of the establishment of the first great Parisian department store” (166). The corpse may also be an indication of the inevitability that Mouret will be able to conquer woman, as he eventually marries the shopgirl, Denise, once she has made enough money to become financially dependent herself. Mouret entices several of the shopgirls to sleep with him in the hopes of a promotion (or at least maintaining their current position), and he uses the connections of upper-class consumer Henriette Desforges to get the support of mortgage broker Baron Hartmann in order to expand his store. Naomi Schor claims that the shopgirl’s marriage to Mouret at the end of the novel represents the “attempted marriage between bourgeois individualism, rationalized efficiency, and the common good,” but it is possible that the couple’s union signifies just the opposite (166). Hannah Thompson recognizes the questions that Zola’s novel raises about the function of the department store in the development of women’s rights. She claims the book represents Zola’s “examination of this commodification of the female body” and women in the novel understand that “it is only by making themselves attractive to men that they retain any value in this sexually driven society” (61). While it is clear that Mouret conquers Denise, he is also able to master a new market that was created because of his store and the upper-class customers that keep him in business.

None of the shopgirls are welcomed into the society of women like Henriette Desforges or Madame Marty. In fact, these upper-class women appear threatened by the shopgirls and are often rude to them. When readers are first introduced to the widow,

Henriette, she is portrayed as an upper-middle class, independent, and business-minded woman. Although she is involved with Mouret, she appears to be aware of his intentions and does not mind him using her to make business connections. It is not until she realizes he has fallen in love with Denise that she loses her sensibility and begins to spend unnecessary amounts of money at his store while spying on Denise. Through clever design, advertisement, and even jealousy, Mouret is able to get women to come to his store and buy his merchandise; his “greatest source of power was publicity” (Zola, 235). By examining some of the ways in which the storeowner is able to get customers to visit the Paradise, I will show how Zola captures some of the many issues women faced with the rise of the department store and promotion of conspicuous consumption.

Mouret invents different forms of advertising to draw women into the Paradise; these are the same advertisements that created many of the conflicting images of the New Woman. Lori Anne Loeb investigates the role of the department store in Victorian advertisements through her book *Consuming angels: Advertising and Victorian Women* (1994). Loeb recognizes the significant function that department stores played in the growth of advertising during this period. She states: “Between 1850 and 1880 a combination of factors—new techniques of illustration, the recognition of an expansive middle-class market, the rise of the press, the abolition of the advertising duty, and the professionalization of technical and creative assistance—produced an unparalleled advertising craze” (5). This craze is evident in Zola’s novel. Mouret spends hours organizing the silk displays; he also comes up with a number of other schemes, like taking out ads in the newspaper, giving out balloons to children, and serving a buffet of

food and refreshments in his store. He is completely aware of the new, pleasure-centered lifestyle that his customers are rapidly becoming accustomed to. Loeb argues that developments in advertising forced the realization that “the role of women as household purchasers acquired new social significance” (33). Women were the ones who ultimately decided on purchases for the house, and advertisers had to acknowledge this in order to sell the multitude of items their department stores carried. However, these new gender-targeted ads began to create stereotypes toward women as it attempted to define the image of the New Woman. Loeb claims that the new Victorian advertisements depicted “the ideal woman” as “self-absorbed and pleasure-oriented enough to delight in her own reflection,” which ultimately convinced many women who were either middle-class workers or upper-class consumers that they should radiate the same qualities. (42). These advertisements not only created a stereotype of the female consumer, they also perpetuated the idea that conspicuous consumption was an acceptable practice. Women began to think it was necessary to possess a number of luxurious items, which contributed to the rapid success of the department store. Even if they could not really afford new items, they found a way to get new silks or gloves anyway.

Shoplifting becomes a prevalent issue in the latter half of Zola’s novel, and the amount of awareness and control Mouret exercises over those who attempt theft in his store indicates his level of control over upper-class consumers and the overall danger of the department store on upper-class women. In Elaine S. Abelson’s book *When Ladies’ Go A-Thieving*, she claims that Zola’s novel was “an attempt to dramatize the materialism of late nineteenth century France and the moral implications of mass consumption” (81).

Abelson still acknowledges that Zola was conscious of the growing issue of conspicuous consumption during this time, and he used the shoplifter as a way of capturing the obsessive nature of the Victorian woman consumer. When Madame de Boves causes a scene at the lace counter, Zola perfectly depicts the woman's lack of conscience in slipping a sample of lace up her sleeve. However, women like Madame de Boves and Madame Marty are also much more susceptible to Mouret's schemes. Both women have a terrible shopping habit; they go to the Ladies Paradise almost every day to buy more things they have no need for. Throughout the story, readers are reminded of the gratuitous nature of the department store. While there are useful items like coats and scarves, there are many more frivolous items that encourage women to be materialistic. By comparing the excessive amount of clothing Madame Marty wastes her money on with the one dress Denise owns that constantly needs mending, Zola illustrates the biggest fault in the department store: it is impracticality. Mouret's store sells a ridiculous number of goods in unimaginable quantities, styles, and sizes, and he successfully entices most of the women of Paris. Even those who can't afford the luxuries the department store offers find themselves spending their time and money in the store multiple days of the week. It is frequently mentioned that Madam Marty's husband does not make enough money to support her spending habit, and he is forced to take a second job. Madame de Boves, on the other hand, has plenty of money but finds pleasure in shoplifting from the store. Near the end of the novel, she is caught by Jove and publicly humiliated. Zola reveals that Mouret offers women who are caught shoplifting a choice: they can sign a form stating that they were caught, or he will call the police. This further underscores the significance

maintaining a respectable image for both Mouret and his customers. By depicting these wealthy women as materialistic and superficial, Zola demonstrates the negative impact the department store has on upper-class society.

Au Bonheur des Dames is a great example of the many ways in which the department store created unrealistic and contradictory images of the New Woman, and it demonstrates the advantages and disadvantages that shopgirls and consumers both faced as they suddenly had options. The department store gave women the opportunity to leave their homes to find jobs, and it also encouraged wealthier women to get out of the house (even if it was just to buy unnecessary items). Upper-class women who spent their afternoons shopping began to place higher values on material and unnecessary things as they became overwhelmed by new advertisement strategies. As these women began to spend more and more on unnecessary luxuries, they became more dependent on their husbands' incomes while still gaining more financial control over household purchases. Although the department store should be credited as a somewhat positive factor in the women's movement, it is also important that we recognize the unfavorable consequences that also resulted because of its invention. Women entering the workforce had a new set of problems to overcome: most were taken advantage of in one way or another and some were under harsher conditions than if they had chosen to rely on a husband or go into a different field of work. Shopgirls were frequently overworked and underpaid. Some were forced to work extra jobs after a full day's work just to make rent, while others resorted to prostitution for extra money or promotions at work. They considered themselves to be of a higher class than many other working-women, but they were still not accepted into

the upper-class society of the Paradise's customers. Although marriage was no longer necessary for women who needed some form of financial stability, for some it was a more appealing offer than the conditions surrounding department stores. Zola's novel demonstrates many of the direct effects that department stores had on women's rights and contradictory image of the New Woman, but Gissing's novel addresses some of the other employment options available to women during this time.

In Gissing's novel, he exhibits several different paths that Victorian women can take in establishing a life for themselves. *The Odd Women*, published in 1893, immediately indicates a possible description of the New Woman; the title of the novel refers to the odd number of women during the Victorian period who were encouraged to find means of supporting themselves. Early in the novel, Rhoda Nunn reveals to Monica Madden: "But do you know that there are half a million more women than men in this happy country of ours?" (44). Because of the odd number of women, it was slowly becoming more acceptable for them to marry either later in life or not at all, but it was still unclear as to what these women could do to support themselves. Gissing addresses women's ability to contribute to and function perfectly well within society without a husband. The Madden sisters each demonstrate a different method of approaching this new economic balance. After the death of both of their parents, the children are left eight hundred pounds and are forced to separate. Martha, Isabel, and Monica were sent to live with a woman, who was charged with caring for the girls as well as giving them an education. The three older girls (Virginia, Alice, and Gertrude) were forced to each find employment. The story continues after two of the girls' deaths and one hospitalization:

Gertrude from consumption, Martha from drowning, and Isabel from brain trouble caused by melancholia.

Critics of Gissing's novel have identified the many ways in which his characters (many argue intentionally) fail to correctly represent the figure of the New Woman; however, I will argue that this is because there is no singular definition for the newly independent woman of this era. Adrienne Munich begins her essay by viewing the shopgirl as a "doubly liminal figure" who struggles to maintain respectability as an independent woman and "stands on the threshold of modernity" (143). Munich believes that Gissing intentionally positions his characters away from typical representations of shopgirls by denying her "useful knowledge while granting some useful knowledge to his New Woman characters" (143). Likewise, Lisa Shapiro Sanders also argues that Gissing's novel reworks "the mid-Victorian ideology of proper femininity" because he does not allow Monica Madden's marriage to Edmund Widdowson to "live up to the romantic ideal" of a shopgirl's marriage (16). She believes that Gissing views marriage as an economic system rather than a romantic endeavor. In Patricia Ingham's introduction to Gissing's novel, she states that to an extent it "subscribes to the discourse which constructs the working classes as lower, inferior, a different species...it captures tellingly the ambivalence of contemporary society towards social class in a period of transition" (xiii). However, this attitude is mainly shown in relation to the concept of marriage. Rhoda and Mary discuss how the different classes view marriage: "The odious fault of working-class girls, in town and country alike, is that they are absorbed in preoccupation with their animal nature. We, thanks to our education and the tone of our society, manage

to keep that in the background” (71). Emma Liggins argues that Gissing is not concerned only with marriage as a defining feature that separates two types of women, but also financial freedom.

It is important to first understand what ways Gissing uses each character to represent a different failed effort of encapturing the New Woman. He is able to accomplish a task similar to Zola’s novel in just one of his major characters: Monica, the youngest Madden sister. Using Monica, Gissing demonstrates the sufferings of shopgirls, but he offers her a way out of that profession without having to resort to marriage or prostitution. She is given the chance to train as a typist. When Monica describes her shopgirl job to Rhoda Nunn, she says:

“There’s twenty minutes for each meal...but at dinner and tea one is very likely to be called into the shop before finishing. If you are long away, you find the table cleared...A girl just gone to the hospital with varicose veins, and two or three others have the same thing in a less troublesome form. Sometimes, on Saturday night, I lose all feeling in my feet; I have to stamp on the floor to be sure it’s still under me” (Gissing, 41).

Her work conditions are very similar to those that Denise suffers through, but Gissing spends minimal time elaborating on the job. Instead, he uses reactions from characters like Rhoda and Mary Barfoot to show how terrible the job sounded to other women of that time. Although Miss Nunn and her business partner Mary Barfoot would like to have Monica join their school, they still expect her to eventually marry. They say, “Monica is a dear little girl...Of course she must find a husband” (60). Much of the novel

is spent determining whether or not one can be an odd woman and also marry, and Monica Madden's future suggests that Gissing does not approve of this combination. In fact, she is given the perfect opportunity to change her path without getting married. Rhoda offers to let her to come study at their school at Great Portland Street, a school for young women who were not given the education needed to find a decent job in the quickly growing consumerist society.

In her reading of the novel, Emma Liggins considers the position of the shopgirl to be the worst possible fate. In her book *George Gissing, the Working Woman, and Urban Culture*, Liggins recognizes the shopgirl's "freedom of movement" is restricted; she has less "control over her occupation of urban space" than that of a prostitute (14). This gives a clear impression of how detrimental readers often consider the fate of a character working as a shopgirl. Liggins considers Monica to be a "victim of the living-in system and its restrictive curfews," indicating the importance of being free to come and go freely (14). Because the orphaned Madden sisters inherited little money and have few skills, they are unable to spend money on any kind of luxury. Liggins explains that a woman entering the workforce was "still in desperate need of financial assistance, training opportunities and advice if she was to become the woman of the future" (100). Yet, Gissing eliminates this obstacle by having the women offer her a loan to help her get through training. Despite Monica's opportunity to become a typist, she gets married to Edmund Widdowson instead, a man she does not love. Monica's marriage does not come with the same benefits at her job offer, but she is able to live freely for much of her marriage.

Another example of a failed depiction of the New Woman is the middle Madden sister, Virginia. She does not fare well after the sisters separate as kids; she becomes an alcoholic at thirty-three in order to deal with the stress of her family's financial problems and other hardships. Although she tries to do what she can for her family, she is ultimately useless. The end of the novel describes her as looking like "a miserable, lifeless object, and shook like one in an ague," and she wants to go to an institution to recover from her alcoholism (366). Having already lost one sibling to consumption and another to an institution, Virginia appears to be Gissing's representation of a failed attempt at becoming a New Woman. Rhoda and Mary describe Virginia and her older sister as "excellent creatures...kind, innocent women; but useful for nothing except what they have done all their lives" (60). It is possible that Virginia was unsuccessful at adapting to the new lifestyles of Victorian women because she did not possess any other training and, unlike her younger sister, was incapable of learning anything of value. With this character, Gissing indicates an age restriction to the image of the New Woman, which conflicts with the environment of *Cranford*. Although Virginia is technically independent, she and Alice are barely able to pay rent and can rarely find jobs, making her quality of life similar to that of a shopgirl.

Of the Madden sisters, the eldest sister Alice Madden offers the closest image of an independent woman who has a potentially positive future. She has continued to serve as a governess but is forced to quit at thirty-five because of poor health, but she and Virginia discuss opening a school for young children for the majority of the novel. While it is not until the novel is ending that it seems like a real possibility, there is still a chance

of it happening. Alice is constantly watching over her younger siblings, and although she is unmarried and has no children of her own, she maintains the motherly role throughout the novel. Rhoda notices early on how well Alice is with children, which suggests that she also does not successfully represent the New Woman figure. The two women of the novel that appear to come closest to this image are Rhoda Nunn and Mary Barfoot.

Gissing reaches outside of the cluster of Madden sisters to their childhood friend, Rhoda, as an example of someone close to capturing the New Woman image. Rhoda is described as possessing “self-confidence, intellectual keenness, a bright humor, frank courage” (25). She lives with Mary Barfoot, and both unmarried women run a secretarial school for young women, which allow young women to escape the overworked lifestyle of those who work for department stores. Rhoda reveals her hatred of department stores, claiming, “I wish girls fell down and died of hunger in the streets, instead of creeping to their garrets and the hospitals” (42). She is completely aware and against the ways that department stores are negatively affecting women, and she hopes that enough attention will be brought to the issue that it will be resolved. Published ten years after Zola, it is possible that Gissing is very aware of the disadvantages of the department store and has decided it does not represent an acceptable means of income and independence for women. Instead, he considers the different ways women are affected outside of the shopgirl life.

Mary Barfoot has a clear image of what she wants the new image of woman to look like; this gives an idea of what Gissing considers the New Woman to be. Mary tells Rhoda that their “proper world is the world of intelligence, of honest effort, of moral

strength” (152). She believes that the older, more traditional image of the perfect woman no longer serves any purpose for them. Mary hopes women will be made “strong,” “self-reliant,” and “nobly independent” rather than continue to be controlled by custom (153). This new attitude reflects how much she and Rhoda believe that education can free women from all forms of dependency. They do not object to women marrying; they only want to make sure that those who cannot will have “a means of living with some satisfaction” (60). Still, they do not predict good things should Monica decide to marry, which she does, and they are right.

Despite everyone discouraging it, Monica agrees to marry Edmund Widdowson, an older man who essentially stalks her until she agrees to marry him. When explaining her decision to consent to his proposal, Monica says, “He loves me so much that he has made me think I *must* marry him. And I am glad of it. I’m not like you, Milly; I can’t be contented with this life” (125). Gissing makes it clear that Monica ultimately fails at representing a possible path for the New Woman. Widdowson proves to be an annoying companion, which leads Monica to have an affair with a man named Bevis. Monica is not the only character that is caught up in a marriage plot. Everard Barfoot relentlessly pursues Rhoda. At first it is a joke, but he eventually falls in love with her. Everard debates with himself whether or not to ask her: “Yet would not an offer of marriage be too commonplace?” (147). He decides to offer a free union rather than a formal, contracted marriage. However, a rumor about him and Monica is spread, which leads the two to separate. Once he discovers that Rhoda knows he did not have an affair with Monica, he returns to confront her. Everard asks Rhoda to marry him again, legally, but

they decide against it. Although they forgive each other, they both admit that they are no longer in love. Instead, he marries Agnes Brissenden, who is from a family that does not concern themselves with education or society.

Gissing ends his novel on a tragic note, and it offers the best explanation of what he imagines as the New Woman. At the end of the novel, Monica has a daughter and dies from complications of childbirth. In a letter to Widdowson, Monica explains that the child is his and asks that it “ought not to suffer because of what I did.” (367). While many assume that she regrets having an affair, it is reasonable to consider that she regrets not taking the job as a typist rather than marrying someone she did not love. Widdowson makes a deal with Alice that he will pay for all of the child’s needs if she agrees to raise it, which she accepts under the condition that he help her find a suitable institution for her sister, Virginia, to recover from alcoholism. She tells him that she plans to open the school for young children that they have always discussed when the child turns two. This allows readers to hope that Virginia will be able to open the school, earn enough money to live comfortably, and be happy with her life after losing most of her family. When Rhoda comes to visit, she notices that Alice looks better than ever: “Her complexion was losing its muddiness and spottiness; her step had become light and brisk” (370). Alice’s improved appearance shows that Alice has found her place in the new society, but it is unclear whether it is as a New Woman. As they discuss the possibility of opening a school for children like Monica’s, Rhoda asks Alice to “Make a brave woman of her” (370). Rhoda’s business is very successful, and she and Mary are going to begin

publishing a paper. Rhoda looks at the baby, who has the same dark, bright eyes as Monica, and murmurs “Poor little child!” (371).

Through Gissing’s refusal to allow any of his main, female characters to be both financially successful and happily married, he creates a partial definition of what could be the New Woman. Rhoda and Mary are able to be successful and happy without ever marrying, and Alice is able to find her place as a mother and also have dreams of opening a school while bypassing the issue of having a husband. While Gissing’s novel still reveals many of the problems that women were facing at this time due to social changes, he offers a much more satisfying ending to his novel than Zola. Not only do his characters avoid conforming to the image of the traditional Victorian woman, they also show multiple possibilities for the New Woman. However, there are still constant contradictions in the character similar to those that Victorian women were facing in their daily life. For instance, Rhoda was in love, but she readily (and falsely) believes she has been betrayed and is alone. Although the most consistent quality of the New Woman is independence, it could be possible for an independent woman to be married, which is later demonstrated in Levy’s novel.

Many workingwomen during the Victorian period were unable to decide what the New Woman was supposed to represent because the media was frequently sending them mixed messages about what this new independence should look like. In Emma Liggins’ article, “‘The Life of a Bachelor Girl in the Big City’: Selling the Single Lifestyle to Readers of *Woman* and the *Young Woman* in the 1890s,” she analyzes two magazines, *Woman* and *Young Woman*, and the effect these magazines have on the balance between

traditional values of Victorian women and those of the New Woman. She argues that the “presentation of the single woman” in these magazines “remained somewhat contradictory and ambiguous,” which has also been a theme in the previous novels (217). By providing pseudo-intellectual articles that deeply contrasted with housewife-targeted advertisements, these magazines created a confusing representation of the independent woman that actually hindered her freedom. The message Liggins notices in these magazines is a warning to women that they must hold onto their “womanliness” on their search for independence (219). Some examples of these reminders include gown advertisements situated within articles on professional women and baby food ads next to a feminist essay. Although these magazines began as well-intentioned attempts to connect with the New Woman and offer helpful advice to those looking for careers and education, Liggins notices they eventually turn into “cautionary advice to the reader” to eat well, dress well, and maintain all other aspects of the womanliness and social class if they are living on their own (219). Women who were raised in a higher class but were forced to take jobs after financial problems, like the Madden sisters and the Lorimer sisters, were often given mixed messages by advertisements about their roles as New Women. While they had more freedom financially, they were placed in an awkward social position.

Levy’s novel *Romance of a Shop* uses the Lorimer sisters to demonstrate how social expectations vary among women from different classes and provides multiple representations of Victorian women at work (including the New Woman). After the death of their father, the four sisters are forced to abandon their upper-middle class positions and find their own way of making a living. They decide to open a photography shop,

where they are able to do things that would not have been acceptable previously. For instance, the girls are able to have men visit their home without worrying what others might think, as it is necessary for their business. Unlike most of the women in Zola's novel, Levy creates female characters that would rather work hard and be independent than rely on a man. However, Phyllis, the youngest Lorimer sister, does quite the opposite. She does not work with the rest of the sisters, as she is sickly, and she runs off with a married man, eventually dying. The devastation surrounding Phyllis' life and death could be an indication of Levy's disapproval of women who married for financial stability rather than working for a living.

The Lorimer sisters in Levy's novel are early Victorian shopgirls. They spend much of the novel attempting to adjust from the upper-middle class positions they held before their father's death to their lowered positions as working women. In Deborah L. Parsons' *Streetwalking the Metropolis: Women, the City, and Modernity*, she argues that Levy follows the same story model as male writers of her time. However, she believes that Levy creates a more intricate representation of Victorian women than most critics observe. Parsons says the four sisters in Levy's novel "at first seem to represent different versions of Victorian womanhood; the Victorian angel of-the-hearth, the New Woman, the aesthetic muse. Yet they cannot actually be read as such simplistic types" (92) For example, Frances represents early Victorian ideals, so she is out of place as she argues in favor of following traditional routes. Gertrude is independent but still follows traditional path of marriage, etc. In many ways, these characters mirror those in Gissing's novel as

they attempt to represent failed Victorian figures, but Levy offers more figures than the New Woman.

It could be argued that Levy's novel simply serves as another example of the social push for a balance in women's roles, which Deborah Epstein Nord argues in her book *Walking the Victorian Streets*. Although Nord believes Levy successfully uses technology to break down traditional depictions of women, she claims the end of the novel counteracts all of the novel's earlier progress. Levy marries three of the sisters and kills off Phyllis, and only Lucy continues with the photography business after also getting married. I disagree with Nord's assertion that Levy ending fails because "she does not know what to do with her independent, idiosyncratic heroines" (750). Instead, I believe Levy intentionally choose this ending in the hope that readers would recognize that independence is not something women should be willing to compromise. Forcing Gertrude to spend the rest of her life attending the social events she hated while playing the doting wife and mother role depicts another woman who has failed at representing the ideal New Woman. The biggest piece of evidence for this claim is found in one of the final characters Levy presents: the "ex-Girtonian without a waist" who moves into the room above the auctioneer's (160). Although the Lorimer sisters fail at remaining independent women, Levy does include a female character that does not compromise her freedom but instead teaches at an all-girls high school where a younger generation will be influenced by her lifestyle. Nord claims that Levy denies this ending to the Lorimers "at least in part because she understands that independence is painful, precarious, and exhausting and because, as a fledgling novelist, she shies away from writing the kind of

book that will tell an uncomfortable truth” (751). However, by giving readers an unsatisfying ending Levy is accomplishing even more than Gissing, who ended his novel with several women who kept their independence, and she also manages to depict an independent working woman who is also married.

Although there were many women in the Victorian Period, such as the Lorimer’s Aunt Caroline, who opposed the shifting attitudes of young women, men were often most guilty of attempting to find a compromise for these changes. Michael Kramp examines balance between feminine versus masculine traits in his article, “Exposing Visual Discipline: Amy Levy’s *Romance of a Shop*, the Decay of Paternalistic Masculinity, and the Powers of Female Sight.” Kramp chooses to view *Romance of a Shop* as a novel where women successfully overpower men, forcing them to find a new perspective on women’s potential. He claims that from the beginning of the Levy’s book, vision is an important aspect of the text that continues to grow in significance. Early on, the young women are able to see a future outside of conventions; they want to open a shop together rather than move in with various relatives. According to Kramp, “Their growing awareness of vision(s) promotes their success as aspirant photographers, and it also helps them, to recognize the disciplinary functions of sight” (111). By prompting women to develop a gaze that can be a representation of authority, Levy makes it possible for the sisters to become ideal symbols of the New Woman. The authority of the women in the novel, specifically Gertrude, is identified by her ability to see the men in the novel clearly and sometimes even defy them. The strongest examples Kramp provides are her confrontations with Sydney Darrell, as she stares him down, causing him to hate her

eventually. He frequently avoids Gertrude's gaze: when they first meet he goes to sit on a sofa behind a screen, when they find themselves at the same dinner in the epilogue, he looks in the opposite direction, and he generally avoids her throughout the rest of the story. Another way in which Kramp points to the significance of the feminine vision in Levy's novel is through their photography business. He claims that "The historical New Woman, in effect, forced men both to acknowledge women's potential and to explicitly exert authority to claim privileges that were previously presumed to be natural" (112). It is the women's ability to see and create photographs that causes their business to succeed. Kramp believes photography gave women the motivation to become professionals who were more aware of their surroundings and, as a result of this new awareness, the "ongoing social surveillance" (136). During this period, the procedures of social decorum were confusing as working-women began to find a place in society. Photography provides a lens through which they could closely observe these restrictions and develop their own opinions about them.

There are moments in Levy's novel where the Lorimer sisters are able to create successful representations of the New Woman. Rather than split up, as the Madden sisters did, they decide to go into business together. While they are working for themselves, they are able to experience a social freedom that Zola and Gissing do not address. Rather than describing characters whose status is advanced because of their decision to enter the workforce, the Lorimers actually lose part of their status. However, because of this they are able to experience a level of social freedom that they otherwise would never have had. They are able to go into the public sphere without much concern over chaperones.

The sisters are also less concerned with dress, as they cannot afford new clothes very often. Although Levy's characters ultimately fail because of their decision to settle back into their original lifestyle, they were able to spend several years effectively representing the figure of the New Woman.

Department stores, typewriters, cameras, and other creations that rapidly changed the way things were produced and consumed had a strong impact on women's rights. While these inventions created job opportunities for middle-class women, they also resulted in an unclear concept of what an independent woman does. Conflicting messages from ads, journals, novels, and other forms of media made it difficult for women during this period to fully realize their potential. The second wave of feminism found itself faced with some of the same issues, as Betty Friedan points out in her book *The Feminine Mystique*. In 1963, Friedan coined the phrase "the feminine mystique," or woman's despondency after returning to the role of housewife after the men returned from World War II. Friedan connects a large portion of this problem to the new direction advertisements were taking, encouraging women to buy the newest vacuum, dishwasher, etc. in order to feel more fulfilled. Friedan claims: "Properly manipulated... American housewives can be given the sense of identity, purpose, creativity, the self-realization, even the sexual joy they lack—by the buying of things" (*The Feminine Mystique*, 174). While it is clear that women in the 1950s were being targeted as consumers and pulled into a market that says consumers have to have the best of the best to be happy, this could have been avoided if someone had recognized the culture of conspicuous consumption that the department store promotes. Although most of the Victorian novels discussed

earlier might not have made it onto high school or college reading lists in the early twentieth century, it is still surprising that it took over sixty years for someone to put a name on an issue wealthy women were having during Zola's time.

Although Friedan does not deal with the issues working-class women were facing in the 1950s, they closely mirror the working conditions Denise Baudu and Monica Madden dealt with. While the novels in this essay tended to focus on the effects new inventions had on working-class women more than upper-class, Friedan's book does the exact opposite. She fails to consider the women who work full-time, often while raising a family, and she does not concern herself with their problems. In today's world, online shopping is the new department store and Kenmore, but unlike women in the past, stores like Etsy allow the modern shop girl to work in much better conditions.

Today, there are some critics, like Rachel Bowlby, who are beginning to make connections between early consumerism and issues from today, but I believe that inventions like the department store in the 1860s, home appliances in the 1950s, and online shopping today have each played a large and interconnected role in hindering the women's movement. In 1987, Bowlby published "'The problem with no name': Rereading Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*," where she discusses Friedan's argument that women lost their freedom during the 1950s due to new developments in consumerism. Bowlby believes:

"The arguments of almost all feminist social critics, before and after Friedan, involve the presupposition or demonstration that women's freedom either never existed or existed only in the remote past. Friedan, however, argues that women

had freedom and lost it. And this peculiarity is perhaps a starting point for thinking about some of the echoes and overtones of the unidentified ‘problem’ I want to explore...how it is related to Friedan’s conceptions of subjectivity, femininity and the American nation” (61-2).

Bowlby recognizes that women gained certain rights and freedoms with different waves of the women’s movement, and she acknowledges the setbacks that have occurred are in many ways linked to consumerist culture. However, she considers class differences to be the main factor that creates a divide between working-women, like the shopgirl, and wealthier women. I argue that this divide grew out of the creation of the department store and the culture of conspicuous consumption that it has perpetuated among women since the nineteenth century. After the creation of the department store, advertising became much more prominent in society. Today, consumers increased concern with purchasing any item they desire is a growing problem with the rising popularity of online shopping, advertising, and blogging that is being targeted primarily at women. These digital resources are causing women to become more obsessed with having the best of everything because they are more and more aware of what everyone else has.

In her article, “Soft Sell Marketing Rhetoric in Feminist Criticism,” Bowlby goes on to define the current view on consumerism. She states: “Sometimes consumerism has been seen as the principal source of women’s oppression in the twentieth century,” (381). Bowlby believes that shopping is not as big of an issue today because it is more socially acceptable, but I do not think that conspicuous consumption becoming an everyday practice should be overlooked because society is beginning to accept it. She

goes on to claim that shopping is considered a “‘postmodern’ interest in pleasure and fantasy” (382). In April of 2015, Amazon release their new “dash button” to customers with a Prime Membership. They send a customer a physical button that can be placed next to a frequently used item, such as laundry detergent. When the consumer is running low on Tide, they can press the button and a new box will arrive in two days. The mindless form that shopping could potentially take on if these buttons are successful indicates a new kind of consumption past that of luxury. Thomas Hines has a similar view on the acceptability of shopping, but he points out gender-specific advertisements that exist because women controlling such a large portion of the market.

Hine’s book, *I Want That!: How We All Became Shoppers* (2002), perfectly captures the stereotypes surrounding female consumers in modern society that originally stemmed from the practices of conspicuous consumption of the Victorian era. He claims: “Shopping is at once an exploration of desires and a fulfillment of responsibility. It elicits guilt and pride” (ix). Hine goes on to illustrate what he thinks to be the differences in men and women shoppers: “Women see shopping as an important part of their lives. Men tend to see it as an extraordinary response to some pressing need. In America, women make 73 percent of all trips to the supermarket” (23). While Hines is specifically interested in shopping for groceries and other household items, like vacuum cleaners, he shows how marketing today targets consumers differently based on gender. For instance, he claims that men are typically shown statistics that indicate the power and strength of a product, while women are told the item’s safety features and how easy it is to use. These are

tactics that Mouret uses to get customers into his department store, and after one hundred and fifty years, consumers are still falling for them.

Another online tool that specifically targets female shoppers is Pinterest. In Cindy Kay Tekobbee's essay "A Site for Fresh Eyes," she challenges the gendered interpretation of women's interest in websites like Pinterest. She first explains the website and its purpose: "Pinterest is an online social networking platform for saving and sharing URLs" (382). She states that "women generally make 85% of household purchases," so marketers are beginning to use websites like Pinterest to track their interests" (381). After establishing that Pinterest is a media-sharing website primarily targeted at women that encourages consumerism and, to some degree, fantasizing among its users, Tekobbee goes on to argue that this problem is partly because of societies narrow definition of digital literacy. Rather than acknowledge women on Pinterest as users who create projects and then go on to accomplish them, critics simply view it as an uncreative way of sharing information. She states that her essay "challenges the overarching narrative that women's online practices and interests are largely those of passive consumers, and that this passive consumption necessarily positions women's online literacy practices as deficient and auxiliary to the practices of men" (386). She points to websites like Wikipedia and Reddit as content-creation sites that are accepted by society as an appropriate use of the internet, whereas Pinterest and other equally creative websites are not. Tekobbee believes that women do not currently have the option to become involved in legitimate online activities that provide creative collaboration opportunities because they were initially "screened out" (386). Therefore, she attempts to

redefine Pinterest in order to make it appear to be viewed as a useful online tool for women. Tekobbee argues “that Pinterest’s member community demonstrates rich digital literacy practices by creating elaborate information-sharing networks and by collectively and individually organizing information as pastiche, montage, art, and, ultimately, as a statement of digital/virtual identity” (386). While I agree that Pinterest users must be digitally-literate to some degree, the overall purpose that the website serves for the majority of its users is as a place to plan extravagant weddings, immaculate homes, and perfect children. The issue behind this website is not its literacy practices; it is that the website is mainly used to promote the same outdated images of women that were encouraged in the 1950s and during the early Victorian era.

In Susan Luckman’s “The Aura of the Analogue in a Digital Age,” she discusses what the growing popularity of websites like Etsy says about the “re-articulation of (largely) women’s domestic work” (249). Etsy is a consumer-driven website, like Ebay, that allows anyone to sell their items online. The website primarily consists of a female client base, and sells things like homemade Christmas wreaths, one-of-a-kind jewelry, and gently used wedding dresses. Luckman is fascinated by the number of domestically produced goods sold through the store, as women had been less inclined to sit at home and knit until the website became popular. She believes that it is partially linked to women’s ability to make these goods on the side while maintaining a regular job as well. Others, she found, turned to the service after losing their jobs, and they found they were able to make enough money with their crafts. A concern with this website’s popularity is not just the multitude of homemade goods that (mainly female) consumers are willing to

purchase, but also this websites ability to put women back into the home, doing domestic work that they have not been inclined toward for decades. However, setting up an Etsy store has been largely beneficial for some.

There are many Etsy sellers who are able to make money off of their favorite hobbies, and some are able to support themselves solely on their Etsy earning. Janice MacLeod quit her job at an advertising firm to become a shop owner on Etsy, where she creates letters full of artwork detailing her experiences in Paris. MacLeod says she “decided to sell a few paintings on Etsy to help fund my adventure but only sold one and my shop lay dormant for a long while,” but it soon became a career after she began creating the Paris Letter. She now has to buy stamps in sheets of 100. There are many successful businesswomen on Etsy and other specialty stores, and there are clear benefits. They are able to work their own hours, they can control the quality of goods they sell to avoid over-committing, and some who would otherwise be out of work are able to find a way to pay their bills doing something they can enjoy. While there are certainly some websites that are fueled by workers who are overworked and underpaid, possibly in the same or worse conditions as Victorian shopgirls, websites like Etsy offer an exceptional opportunity for women who are creative enough to find a niche in the market. They ultimately resemble the teashops that were run out of business by the department store.

While the department store was able to overpower the smaller, privately run teashops and tailors during the late nineteenth century, department stores are now being overpowered by online shopping. While consumers are ordering thousands of MacLeod’s Paris letters, fewer are actually going to some of the iconic Parisian stores that sparked

the excessive shopping practices still practiced today. Adam Gopnik's article "The View From A Bridge" describes the great monuments of Paris, such as its store La Samaritaine. As one of the department stores that inspired Zola's novel, its recent closing marks the end of an era in consumerism. Gopnik describes the scene as "the collapse of the grand bourgeois mercantile civilization of Paris" and the rise of American tourism. While Americans tourists may be one of the primary reasons the popular "love locks" bridge is currently straining under the weight of over half a million locks, it is ultimately the circulation of these previously low-traffic sites on Pinterest that lead the heard.

I believe the way advertising has progressed since the Victorian developments like the department store plays a key role in how women are still continuing to practice conspicuous consumption. Pinterest and Etsy are just two of many websites that are currently supporting the same trends that created issues for women during the first and second wave of the women's movement. However, there are also benefits to websites like Etsy that allow individuals to sell their own products. By recognizing the competitive nature that conspicuous consumption creates between and among women, we can begin to be more purposeful in our shopping and online experiences. If women become more aware of the way advertisements are targeted toward them for things they often do not need (or sometimes really want), they can become more purposeful in what they do buy. Shopping can still be a pleasurable experience without becoming an all-consuming task. Instead, consumers should recognize gender-targeted advertisements and websites for what they are--a way to make money—and be sure that they are only buying, shopping, planning, or pinning something because they want to.

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