Transformations in a Culture of Consumption: Women and Department Stores, 1890–1925

William R. Leach

"We dream, we work, we wake!" declared Artemas Ward, one of America's first great advertising geniuses, in 1892. "The world seems real only when it answers to our individual touch. Yet, beyond our touch, beyond our waking, beyond our working, and almost in the land of dreams, lie things beyond our present thought, greater, wider, stronger, than those we now lay hold on. To each a world opens; to everyone possibilities are present." Ward captured here what I wish to develop at much greater length in this essay on the culture of consumption and women. America at the close of the nineteenth century and at the beginning of the next was, indeed, a land of "possibilities" and "dreams" that flowered within the heart of a new culture and that had the power to change older patterns that had hitherto distinguished the behavior of many women.

As recent historical study of women has so consistently shown, nineteenth-century middle-class Americans viewed women as dependent, emotional, deeply religious, and sexually pure beings who were supposed to tend the domestic fires and to bear and rear children. Men, on the other hand, were thought of as stalwart citizen-producers, family providers, rational people who found personal fulfillment in public life and in the individual ownership of property. The public life was male, and individualism a male legacy that only a few women dared claim as their own. By 1915 that older paradigm had been deeply weakened by the transformation of work. Men now received wages and salaries in factories or in ever-expanding corporate and bureaucratic structures, while many women had entered the work force, some finding jobs in the new consumer, service-oriented industries.

Alongside those changes in work emerged a vast culture of consumption. Forged by merchants in the company of enthusiastic politicians, reformers,

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1 Artemas Ward, "Stray Shots," Fame, 1 (Dec. 1892), 323.
educators, and artists, this capitalist culture was so powerful as nearly to dwarf all alternative cultures. Advertising gave it shape; a new abundance of commodities established its foundation. The culture of consumption was an urban and secular one of color and spectacle, of sensuous pleasure and dreams. It subverted, but never overturned, the older mentality of repression, practical utilitarianism, scarcity, and self-denial. It slowly encompassed service and comfort as desirable goals, intermingling competition and cooperation, blurring the lines between work and leisure.3

The culture of consumption had a transformative effect on women. Many of them imaginatively reconceived themselves as women within that dense and volatile situation. Such an imaginative reconception, the principal subject of this essay, developed out of a capitalist culture that had both strong manipulating and strong utopian currents, and it was freely chosen by individual women who interpreted that culture in their own ways. The focus here is on the emancipating impact of consumer culture on two kinds of women—working women who had power within consumer institutions and mostly middle-class women who shopped and spent much time in such institutions. This is not to deny that much could be said about the more grim components of consumer experience: gross material indulgence; the dominance of men in the manufacture of fantasy and in managerial hierarchies; unfair wage scales for women and the exploitation of women in consumer industries; the reification of women as objects of desire in advertising; and the misery many poor women must have felt as they passed the windows of city retail stores, which revealed to them an unobtainable world of luxury. These aspects of consumer life, among others, must be considered if we are to have a fully dialectical, historical assessment of consumption.

However, at the risk of losing such a dialectical perspective, this essay deals largely with those patterns of consumer life that implied a new freedom from self-denial and from repression, a liberation that promised to expand the province of rewarding work and of individual expression for women. Too often leftist historians of consumer society have interpreted the modern quest for individual autonomy as manipulated, based on the consumer desire for commodities and determined by the needs of managerial elites. Although those critics are partly correct, they have tended to exaggerate the extent to

which the mass of women (and men) are manipulatable and passive. As a result, they cannot account for the way early consumer capitalism—even though that capitalism often miserably failed to live up to its promises—secured the loyalties of otherwise intelligent, resourceful, and thoughtful women. The explanation lies in the opportunities and in the imaginative culture that arose from early consumer capitalism. It can be seriously argued that over time that culture, as well as the work provided by consumer institutions that have proletarianized much female labor and that have established even clearer class distinctions among women, has ceased to generate the same enthusiasm it once did. It would be mistaken, however, to conclude, on the basis of that shift, that such enthusiasm never existed and that the justification for it was not compelling. To make such a judgment would be to forfeit the chance to understand how consumer capitalism appealed so well to the longings and desires of many individual women.

The essay is divided into two equal parts. The first part lays out in detail the distinguishing elements of the culture of consumption and uses the department store as the main institutional focus. The second part describes how the behavior of women was affected and transformed by the culture of consumption in general and by the department store in particular.

By the 1890s such consumer businesses as restaurants, hotels, theaters, and dry goods houses had been converted into festival environments severed from their former identities. Like the architects of any great cultural venture, many merchants placed much stock in the powers of the imagination to invent a new institutional world. "Imagination urges on," wrote H. Gordon Selfridge, the American founder of the London department store Selfridge's in 1909, in his lyrical book The Romance of Commerce. "It is the yeast of progress. It pictures the desirable." Consumer culture, as it took shape and ever widened like an enchanted circle until it touched every nook and cranny of city life, was above all an imaginative, improvisational, even surreal culture, freely mixing often contradictory elements into fascinating and original patterns that took somewhat different forms in cities from New York to San Francisco. Such improvisational richness acted as a check against the standardizing and homogenizing thrust of modern capitalist industry so long as the major cities and the regions surrounding them retained control over their own productive resources.


Department stores pictured the desirable as did no other contemporary institution. Launched as early as the 1870s by the demands of the market, made possible by mass concentrations of capital and people and by the expansion of the transportation system, department stores had appeared in thousands of cities by the 1890s and had grown into the palatial giants of urban retail. They had little in common with the drab dry goods houses of the earlier period, which had been operated by pious Protestant merchants. In the language of W. F. Hotchkin, an advertising manager at John Wanamaker's, store decorators "transfigured" and "transposed" the stores as well as the goods into "pictures" to impress the customers. Behaving like revolutionary actors, the stores occupied urban space in both physical and psychological ways. They sought to weaken resistance on the part of people unaccustomed to this form of buying; they attempted to control markets formerly dominated by smaller retail establishments; and they competed successfully with popular street culture, which struggled to consume much of the same urban space. Bolstered by their own passions, store merchants labored to justify their right to exist and to command large markets; and they did it, partly, through festive, celebratory methods.6

The stores conducted street fairs and carnivals in the spring and the fall, reritualizing the passage of time. Long before R. H. Macy sponsored its famous Thanksgiving Day affair, first organized in 1924 by its immigrant employees, department stores had had similar floral and float parades. The stores knit the days between Thanksgiving and Easter more closely together. They resurrected older holidays and dreamed up new ones, such as Ladies' Day and the Fête d'Automne. "Everyday must be a special day." By 1900 seasonal, festive, and exotic themes—"central," or "single," "ideas" around which the details of store life were orchestrated—had become part of the everyday presentation of commodities. Stores were decorated to look like French salons, rose and apple-blossom festivals, "the streets of Paris," Egyptian temples, semitropical refuges in the middle of winter, Japanese gardens, the "October woods." The Thousand and One Nights served as a nearly inexhaustible source for fanciful display ideas. In May 1913 the huge rotunda of Wanamaker's New York store was voluptuously decked out like a vision from that collection of tales. Although interest in that Oriental text, and in ones similar to it, ran deep in the stream of nineteenth-century urban cultural life, it did not take such widespread institutional expression until this time. Fascination with it was a mark of new desires pervasively taking shape within the culture of consumption, which many Americans projected into faraway lands.7


7 L. Frank Baum, The Art of Decorating Dry Goods Windows (Chicago, 1900), 165–66; Dry Goods Economist, March 20, 1897, p. 97; ibid., Oct. 6, 1900, p. 20; ibid., May 24, 1902, p. 73;
Department stores were among the first modern institutions to disseminate the new technologies of color, glass, and light. The adoption of those technologies for display further enhanced the festive atmosphere of the stores, decisively setting off the world of consumption from that of production. Throughout the 1890s and beyond, merchants helped make a new glass environment, using curved or straight glass doors and shelves, glass counters and containers, and, by 1905, forty-one different kinds of glass showcases. In a major departure, the social implications of which have yet to be examined, glass mediated between people and goods in a new way; it permitted everything to be seen and at the same time rendered it inaccessible. Mirrors of all kinds appeared to create the "illusion" of space and abundance, to "conceal" defects in store architecture, and to make each article "show to advantage." Some mirrors multiplied images, whether of customers or of commodities, to infinity.

From the 1870s observers of the American commercial scene recognized the radical cultural significance of the use of color in display, that its adoption would act as a "handmaiden to luxury," as "an aid to comfort." "The effects of color," wrote journalist Gail Hamilton in 1873, "bring an exquisite enjoyment which scarcely anything else equals." Display managers learned the new color theory and exploited color, often in the most adroit ways. They decorated with puffed archways of colored silk; they hung garlands of flowers, draperies of colored plush, cages of colored birds. The biggest stores designed rooms, individual displays, the entire store around a single color scheme. Green in all its tints and shades prevailed from basement to roof at William Filene's Sons in Boston in 1901. In 1907 green was everywhere in Greenhut's, one of the last great stores to serve downtown Manhattan trade: carpets, side walls, stool seats, and desk blotters wore different shades of green; window backgrounds were green velvet, and the store attendants dressed in green; there were green stationery, green stock boxes and wrapping paper, green string, even green ink and green ribbon for the green store typewriters. Perhaps most important of all, customers saw in the department store, as in no other institution, the spectrum of new colors manufactured from chemical dyes. They viewed "fast colors," colors in all combinations, colors that melted into one another, inspired by Loie Fuller, the American dancer who performed in flowing draperies under colored lights. Fuller ushered into existence new prismatic blends of tints in gauzes, artificial flowers, plumes, and ribbons. After 1893 people could observe in the stores colors that no one had ever seen before.


\footnote{ibid., June 29, 1893, p. 21; ibid., March 24, 1894, p. 83; ibid., Jan. 4, 1896, p. 7; ibid., March 27, 1897, pp. 39-41; ibid., April 6, 1901, p. 51; ibid., Feb. 2, 1904, p. 58; ibid., Sept. 21, 1907, p. 36; ibid., April 3, 1920, pp. 103-07; K. Venkataramen, The Chemistry of
Artificial and natural lighting transfigured the stores into "refined Coney Islands." Retailers moved swiftly from gas and blinding arc light to prismatic light, which efficiently focused daylight into the stores, and to electric light from tungsten filaments in globed containers. After 1905 specially constructed, concealed lamps erased shadows and evenly diffused a soft radiance throughout interiors. Combined with the technologies of color and glass, the effect of light could be stunning. Some stores had fountains illuminated by colored light and had electrical towers that projected "varying hues." In 1902 Marshall Field in Chicago erected its magnificent opalescent glass dome, designed by the Louis C. Tiffany Studios and illuminated by four "golden globes of light" suspended beneath, the largest single piece of iridescent glass mosaic in the world. By the early 1920s decorators adopted spotlighting and colored screens to transform interiors into beautiful spaces.10

Exterior display was no less ingenious or spectacular in its mingling of color, glass, and light. The stores floodlighted their exteriors or outlined them in light. They relied on poster art, electrical signs, and illuminated and painted billboards—all new kinds of advertising blanketing the cityscape by 1915 and producing such sights as the "Blazing Trail" or the "Great White Way." In 1913 Gimbel Brothers of Milwaukee put up the biggest electrical sign in the world. Hoisted to the top of a fourteen-story building in the heart of Milwaukee and spelled out by 2,500 lamps, the word "GIMBELS" could be read thirty miles away. Those clearly focused signs, commercial guides through the spectacle of American abundance, brought great color and light to the city streets. Outdoor advertisers loved the idea that they had the whole sky as a background (and who else in that era had such rights to the sky?). Such advertising, as retailers themselves liked to claim, was created to communicate only "agreeable sensations," to make people smile and to forget their worries [and, of course, to buy]; like other forms of advertising, it was supposed to "command involuntary attention." It invited projection into a new world of fantasy and personal transformation. As one observer said of the poster art of Jules Cheret, the Frenchman who had a decisive impact on American dry goods poster design: "We sigh for things that never have been, never can be and never would have been suggested except for the [poster artist].”11


That desire to show things off, to publicize or to advertise whatever American capitalism yielded, marked a critical moment in the formation of a new culture of consumption. The concept of show invaded the domain of culture, whether in the shape of a theatrical show, a baby show, a show girl, a showroom, or a showroom. Perhaps inadvertently, the desire to show things off helped to loosen the resistance to personal sexual display and performance in public that had hitherto distinguished American social behavior. As Elbert Hubbard, one of the great pioneers in retail advertising, declared, "life is too short for you to hide yourself away mantled in your own modesty."12

The department store show window, emerging as a major instrument of advertising, added to this development. Through its windows the department store exercised its most magical and immediate external appeal to women, as well as to the men who stopped to peer into them. Plate-glass windows, along with the windows of other consumer and business institutions, dramatically altered the appearance of city streets. Technological invention and advertising needs made store windows, only erratically and unsystematically developed for display in the nineteenth century, central to the success of department store business in the early twentieth century. With the advent of the cheap manufacture of plate glass in this country in the mid-1890s, show windows became much stronger, larger, and perfectly clear. By 1915 great banks of store windows extended not only along the streets but beneath them as well, at subway stops in many major cities.13

After 1915 many of the largest stores were transforming their windows into little stage sets, wherein single commodities might be presented in the best possible light. "You must offer an easily realized view of something in my Lady’s Mind," one retailer advised his peers, "and she injected with that invigorant, is going to buy it, wants it, will have it." By looking into and actively interpreting those windows, women might have been stirred, not by an "invigorant" to buy, but by some other stimulus, by some longing, perhaps, for something far beyond what any commodity in the window might satisfy. Many stores went out of their way to make their windows into "people’s picture galleries," displaying the best in art. Before World War I people could see classical and Renaissance art, art nouveau, cubism, and futurism; and by the late 1920s, art deco. The windows as a whole were often more important than the goods within them: they communicated festivity, vitality, beauty, and fantasy, revealing the signature of individual stores and the inner possibilities of store life.14

Department stores seemed as if they were not stores at all but theatrical havens, imaginative mediums that depended on the existence of commodities

and that transcended them at the same time. As one store decorator, Jerome Koerber, declared, the point was to “eliminate the store.” Store merchants destroyed the older reality associated with retail selling and created a new reality that voraciously incorporated every myth and fantasy, every custom and tradition to entice people to shop and to keep them in the stores. The department store borrowed from other mass consumer and public institutions, as they did from it. By 1920 the department store was a zoo (Bloomingdale's and Wanamaker's in New York had enormous pet stores), a botanical garden (floral shops, miniature conservatories, roof gardens), a restaurant (some of the major stores had lavish restaurants bigger than any other in their cities), a barber shop, a butcher shop, a museum (gift and art shops, art exhibits), a world's fair, a library, a post office, a beauty parlor.15

As early as the 1890s, when merchants started to build their own auditoriums, department stores literally became theaters, putting on plays, musicals, concerts, and, in some instances, spectacular extravaganzas. In 1904 Richard Strauss conducted the world premier performance of his Symphonia Domestica in the big rotunda of Wanamaker's New York store. Display managers used theatrical strategies inside and outside the stores. Windows not only were conceived as stage sets but also often depicted scenes from the latest theatrical productions. By 1900 customers did not see the bleaker areas in the stores, the counting and bookkeeping rooms, the manufacturing floors if there were any. ‘‘The selling departments,’’ said one observer in 1902, ‘‘is the stage upon which the play is enacted.’’ Signs of hard work were placed out of sight. The low wages and mixed feelings of salesclerks were hidden behind courteous smiles and fashionable clothes or uniforms.

Had they been alive to witness it, the merchants of the 1840s would have blinked at such a transformation. What, they would have asked, is an auditorium doing in a retail store? a restaurant? a roof garden? a beauty parlor? What is a beauty parlor in the first place?

Immersed in those theatrical, surreal settings, commodities themselves acquired new life, new meanings. By 1900 the American economy was based on commodity exchange markets, cut off from traditional forms of barter and gift exchange. This economy produced a plethora of goods that in turn created what the poet and essayist Lewis Hyde describes as an “excitement of possibility.” Unlike traditional gifts (modern gifts begin as commodities), which cannot be sold on the market, which circulate only in tightly knit communities, and which bind individuals to and within the group, commodities circulate freely and have no binding power. That liberating character of commodities, according to Hyde, generates an excitement that gifts do not contain. “The excitement of commodities,” he writes, “is the excitement of


possibility, of floating away from the particular to taste the range of available life." In a way unsurpassed by any other institution of the time, the department store housed a vast range of exciting commodities. What women formerly made at home and in private—foods, clothing, soap, cosmetics, and so on—was now arrayed before them in public, made available by revolutions in transportation and communications to anyone who could afford to buy it. From the early 1890s the stores showed an unprecedented quantity of goods, from coffee and exotic fruits to linen and woven rugs from far-off places. The stores marketed out-of-season flowers and in their own pet shops sold anything from rare birds to marmoset monkeys.17 For the first time, women of nearly any economic bracket could choose from a spectrum of mass-produced, increasingly streamlined everyday wear and sportswear. By purchasing imitation jewels, artificial silk and furs, cheap perfume—all new on the market—women could partake of both the luxury and the theatrical behavior of the rich.

Department stores, however, did not simply "sell" commodities: they intervened with advertising skills to amplify the excitement of possibility inherent in the commodity form. They attempted to endow the goods with transformative messages and associations that the goods did not objectively possess. As Marshall Field's advertising put it in 1912, "through the development of ideas this store becomes a vast repository of possibilities to the individual customer."18 To buy a shawl in a "Japanese garden," therefore, was to appropriate not only the shawl but the exoticism injected into it by its setting.

Fashion intensified the excitement of commodities. "Fashion," observed a retailer in 1908, "imparts to merchandise a value over and above its intrinsic worth" and "imbues with special desirability goods which otherwise would excite only languid interest." The compelling power of that value rests on what René Girard has described in another context as the "model" of "desire." This model has attributes that people seek to emulate and that they hope will set them apart from other people, heightening their desirability. Fashion intervenes between the commodity and the consumer to erect a structure of "triangular desire" and is especially potent in a fluent society where class lines are unclear. Relentlessly shifting, fashion causes anxiety in those who obey its laws; thus because the model of desire is always embraced by many people at the same time, it at once loses its appeal, to be cast away for a newer model, and then a newer one.19 Fashion has another dimension: it is playful and secular. Like the merchants who constantly change store interiors and exteriors, fashion designers exult in the imaginative reconstruction of reality, the mixing of discordant elements, the exploitation of all styles from

18 Advertising World, 16 (March 1912), 11.
19 Dry Goods Economist, Aug. 15, 1908, p. 3; René Girard, Deceit, Desire, and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore, 1965), 1–52. René Girard does not deal with fashion; I have applied his arguments to the subject.
traditional to modern. Fashion dwells on custom only as it enhances the value of the goods.

The American department store did more than any other institution to bring fashion to multitudes of people. From the 1870s it tied the glamour of Paris, of aristocracy and nobility, and later the aura of the theater and the movie screen to the goods on display. In the early 1900s American merchants took a revolutionary step by installing the exclusive and intimate Paris fashion show in the department store, a mass consumer institution. Ehrich Brothers of New York gets the credit for conducting the first show in 1903, soon after eclipsed by Wanamaker’s impressive shows and the “promenade des toilettes” at Gimbel’s. Exhibiting clothes designed by Europeans and later by Americans, and accompanied by the requisite ramps and stages and by the first live female models, adult and juvenile, fashion shows were immediately popular in stores everywhere in the country. After 1915 there were style shows and children’s fashion shows; united fashion and style shows organized by several stores at once; fashion movies; and, finally, the great fashion pageants of the late 1910s and early 1920s, spectacular, multimedia affairs with orchestras, models, special effects, and theatrical performances and with thousands of people in attendance. The first pageant, held in St. Louis in the summer of 1917, closed with “Revels of Dionysius,” a fully choreographed dance number. Two years later a pageant entitled “The Garden of Enchantment” was mounted around “Aladdin and the Wonderful Lamp.”

Limited in the nineteenth century to a small section of the population living in relatively small cities, fashion swelled to huge proportions by the 1920s. The engine of fashion existed now in thousands of cities at the heart of everyday life, churning up desire for commodities that carried with them the promise of personal transformation.

A related feature of consumer life was its sensually suggestive and remissive side. Department stores did little to prevent or to control the loosening of sensual boundaries; indeed, they promoted it, even in the face of much opposition from purity and reform groups. “Certain organizations of women,” declared the editors of the Dry Goods Economist, the main trade voice for the stores, “are claiming [that] the stores . . . are ruining the youth of the land by display of corsets and garments” and “that the ‘scandalous hussies [wax figures]’ should not be permitted to display their waxen charms so publicly. What sort of minds do these venerable women possess? Do they suppose that the youth of our land are equally advanced in prurience with themselves?” By the turn of the century, store windows showed everything from bedroom sets


to teacups, from lingerie to evening gowns that clearly outlined the body with "slits up one side to leave still less to the imagination." With the opening of their liquor and wine departments in the late 1890s, the big stores opposed all efforts by temperance groups to restrict sales. Store advertising, moreover, sought to trigger buying on impulse, by feeling and not by rational thought, and to open people further to sensual suggestion. By creating artificial, festive environments and by saturating goods and stores with meaning, merchants conjured up what can only be called a potentially uncontrollable circumstance of longing and desire. The outcome must have been to widen the terrain in which many forms of desire were given expression.  

Department stores contributed to the formation of an image-producing culture that further weakened sensual controls. By their very nature, colorful images, whether in the form of windows, illustrations, posters, or billboards, appealed directly to the visual sense and had the power to stir the imagination in a less mediated way than did white and black copy or illustration. Retail advertisers were quick to grasp that fact and by 1910 were regularly replacing what Robert Ogden, Wanamaker's pioneering advertising manager, called "cold print" with "hot pictures." Endowed with color, those images possessed carnivalesque properties, sensual concreteness, plasticity, and zest. Service was another remarkable feature of the stores and of other consumer institutions. From the moment that the dry goods houses began rapidly developing in the 1870s in a climate of intense rivalry, service was grafted to store practice. Consumption and service evolved together. Ladies' parlors, restaurants and lunch counters, the practice of giving free gifts and souvenirs such as flowers and ice cream, free checking services—all had reached the commonplace by the 1890s. As early as 1895 many stores were offering free child-care facilities—small nurseries and, later, elaborate playgrounds staffed by trained personnel—that gave customers the chance to wander about and to shop alone. Orchestras and small bands that played for the customers became so popular that people "expected to do their shopping to the accompaniment of music." Siegel-Cooper even stationed an all-women orchestra in its grocery department. By 1910 people could attend free art exhibitions, lectures, plays, and "extravaganzas" organized for them in store theaters and recital halls. In 1903 Siegel-Cooper, famous for its "spectacular extravaganzas," produced in

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its fifth-floor auditorium a six-week-long "Carnival of Nations," climaxing in August with "Oriental Week" and highlighted by an exotic show called "Phantasma, The Enchanted Bower." That show, embellished by "thrilling" light-and-color effects, delivered a "glimpse of the Orient—a Turkish harem, a parade of Turkish dancing girls, a 'genie' of the lamp" and "Cleopatra of the Nile." A year later the store staged its "Amazma" show, which consisted of "incandescent illusions," "weird transformations," and "startling and beautiful electrical displays."24

The big stores had branch public libraries and tiny hospitals to care for ailing shoppers. Store "hostesses" guided and entertained the "guests" who might otherwise have been befuddled or lost. From the late 1890s merchants began to extend charge privileges to more and more women. By 1902 charge accounts had achieved full and widespread legitimacy; in that year every store in New York but one had fallen in line with the credit ranks.25

Over time many Americans had come to consider the department store as an "eleemosynary institution maintained for the purpose of serving the public without regard for profit." Visitors to the United States were astonished by the extent of the service. As an English advertising manager from Harrods in London declared in 1919, "I do not know whether stores have created and fostered the demand for service, or whether it has developed because there was a desire for service which department stores recognized and met; but it certainly causes a tremendous amount of overhead expense, and it is a question if it has not been carried too far."26

Service fit, yet did not fit, the American scene. On the one hand, merchants, by dispensing services or gifts and by proclaiming that all customers would be cared for in the stores and that no comfort would not be forthcoming, challenged both the atomism of the commodity market and the older republican-individualist contention that people must be self-reliant and independent. On the other hand, service appeared to fulfill the utopian American promise that the happiness and well-being of everyone could be provided for. The emphasis was on individual happiness, although it was to be satisfied within institutional settings. Service could be described as a peculiar American variant of neosocialism [I do not think "corporate paternalism" quite captures the meaning here], existing in tension with the imperatives of commodity selling. Many merchants viewed the stores as public, not private,


institutions and were so enthusiastic about service that their commitment to it threatened to overturn the system of profit that gave birth to it in the first place. Of the established merchants, John Wanamaker approached a utopian perspective. In 1897 he seriously proposed that his store was not a ‘‘capitalist’’ or ‘‘Wanamaker store’’ serving mercenary motives: it was a ‘‘people’s store.’’ Most merchants, however, tried to resolve the tension between service and profit in behalf of profit. At the risk of losing customers, they passed on service expenses to consumers in the form of higher prices; they cut back on services or introduced self-service; they levied charges for such things as alterations and deliveries. Nevertheless, the troubling fact remained that customers could enjoy many of the services without ever making a purchase.27

The combined elements of consumer life—fantasy exteriors and interiors, commodity excitements, fashion, service—created a dynamic chemistry capable of influencing, even changing, individual identities and gender behavior. White middle-class women were the first to experience that world at the closest range, the first to feel its transformative power. The impact was complex.

On the one hand, such consumer businesses as department stores deepened and reinforced gender distinctions; store decorators, by consciously crafting interior spaces and schemes, forcefully institutionalized stereotypes and images that may have been incompletely realized only in the minds of most men and women. Thus the color in the stores, the fashion and the theater, the indulgence and the impulse became ever more associated in the minds of both sexes with femininity. Those conditions would go unchanged even as department stores opened their doors to men in a big way in the early 1920s. Over time men had separate street and elevator entrances and separate departments, or ‘‘stores,’’ dressed in dark and ‘‘rugged’’ colors. Everything was done to create distinct gender spaces for men and women, even as (or especially because) the exigencies of the capitalist market pulled them more closely together than ever before in the public domain. The motive was not to prevent sexual interaction in public (which might have been the case in another culture) but to give men psychological peace of mind.28

On the other hand, at the same time that consumer life reinforced sexual differences, it also challenged them. The most obvious change for women came in the area of work, although to a limited degree. In that new context, the older sexual division of labor, which connected women with the production of household commodities, functioned in behalf of female independence outside the home. In the period after 1890, many women across the country worked as editors and copywriters for fashion and advertising periodicals, as poster and billboard advertisers in advertising agencies, as dress designers and illustrators, and as directors or owners of cosmetic firms. Although men indisputably filled the highest managerial ranks, women worked at nearly every other level of the department store hierarchy. By 1912 Mary H. Tolman,

an analyst of the stores, could say that "here more than anywhere else, equal
pay and equal opportunities have been offered to those who show results—
whether they are men or women." Here, moreover, as Achsah Gardner, style
coordinator at Marshall Field in the 1920s, proclaimed, "a great many girls
who aren't married, and a lot of those choosing not to be married, are having
lives of their own that are more exciting and stimulating than anything they
dreamed could ever happen to them."29

Middle-class women found jobs as store doctors, as assistant merchandising
managers, as professional shoppers, and as traveling models. In many stores
they predominated as advertising managers and as educational social-welfare
directors. A number of women traveled the world as sales representatives, a job
so unusual, so new, that it inspired Edna Ferber to fictionalize the experience
of such a woman, the first depiction in American literature, according to
Ferber, of the life of an "American business woman." Above all, women
worked as buyers, often gaining such status after years of hard toil in the
stores. Female buyers, commonly labeled the "prima donnas" or "queens" of
retailing, commanded their own budgets, acted as individual merchants in
their own departments, received excellent salaries, and went everywhere in
the country and abroad to discover markets and styles. By 1916 almost one-
third of department store buyers were women; by 1924, over one-third, a
surprising figure given the central importance of the department store to the
American economy.30

At one significant level, then, consumer life provided a minority of women
with independence where once they had been constrained by dependence. The
possibility for gender transformation, however, existed on a multitude of

29 Emily Kimbrough, Through Charley's Door [New York, 1952], 178; Mary H. Tolman,
Positions of Responsibility in Department Stores and Other Retail Selling Organizations: A Study
of Opportunities for Women [New York, 1921], 37; "Business Notes," Poster, 3 (Nov. 1912), 9;
Edmund Arrowsmith, "Women in the Poster Advertising Field," ibid. (Dec. 1912), 19–21; "She
Puts the 'Flash' in Flashers," Signs of the Times, 20 (Oct. 1, 1913), 38; "We Are Seven,' Say the
Olivie Sisters, Hair Specialists," Independent Woman, 7 (Sept. 1927), 18–19, 47; Rose Gotthold,
"One Woman's Success," Business Woman's Magazine, 1 [Nov. 1914], 38–39; "Business Helps,
Money-Making Plans for the Ambitious Girl," ibid., 63–65; Catharine Oglesby, Fashion Careers
American Style [New York, 1930], 35–266.

30 Louise Robinson Blaisdell, "From Cash Girl to Buyer," Business Woman's Magazine, 2 (April
1915), 50–52; Mae De Mon Sutton, I Reminisce— [Fort Lauderdale, 1942], 29–39, 59–67; Estelle
7; Elizabeth Hale Lally, "The Big Department Store: The Advertising Manager's Job," in
Advertising Careers for Women, ed. Blanche Clair and Dorothy Dignam (New York, 1939), 35;
Merle Higley, Women in Advertising in New York Agencies (New York, 1924), 1–18; Beulah
Elfreth Kennard, The Educational Director in the Retail Store [New York, 1918], 1–12; Edna
Ferber, Emma McChesney and Co. [New York, 1915]; Edna Ferber, A Peculiar Treasure [New
York, 1939], 172–73. The figures on buyers are from Sheldon's Retail Trade in the United States
(New York, 1916, 1924). This directory furnished the retail business with a list of all buyers in the
country and is still published today. The 1916 percentage is based on a sample of 3,592 buyers in
major cities in New York, Illinois, Pennsylvania, California, Massachusetts, Connecticut, and the
Deep South, 1,315 of whom were women; the 1924 figure of 7,922, which covers more cities in
the country, includes 3,040 women. Ibid., 1–289. The figures do not reflect the total number of buyers
in both years.
planes, touching both women who worked and those middle-class women who shopped and spent much of their time in the stores.

As early as the 1840s and 1850s, especially in the urban centers, shopping had become a woman's job, reflecting the gender differentiation of roles that resulted from the separation of workplace and home and that was supported by the rise of wage and salaried male labor. An index of the control many middle-class women had over the family budget, shopping gave them a measure of economic power they lacked by not working. After the Civil War the number of shopping women increased. In the late 1860s Alexander Turney Stewart, the first great department store prince, pioneered in institutionalizing shopping as a female activity. It was one of his dreams to see "two acres of ladies all shopping at one time." By the 1880s the New York Times could report "the awful prevalence of the vice of shopping among women," an addiction, it warned, "every bit as bad as male drinking or smoking." As retail institutions and districts expanded, shopping became possible for more and more women. By 1915 women were doing between 80 and 85 percent of the consumer purchasing in the United States.31

In the early period shopping was only a minor incident in the round of domestic chores performed by most middle-class women. Moreover, as many diaries of such women indicate, it never superseded such public activities as churchgoing and charity or moral reform work. For example, the diary of Mary Lester Harris, wife of a New York City dry goods merchant, never mentions shopping; rather, Harris is concerned with her family and, particularly, with religion. "This is the last day of the year," she writes typically in 1848, "and what have I done for Christ?" By 1880 Christian reform work increasingly competed with shopping for the attention of city women. Sophie C. Hall, wife of an Episcopalian minister, begins her diary with religious reflections and describes in subsequent pages her prayer meetings and missionary work. But Hall also shops, often much longer than she wishes. "Got to Macy's Emporium," she writes in January 1879. "I saw so many beautiful things that we found it a trying matter to get out."32

By the turn of the century, shopping had developed into an almost full-time secular and public business. It was also an adventure bursting with new meanings. In that new context shopping posed many dangers for middle-class women who were dependent on male incomes. Through a multitude of display devices, merchants "encouraged" women to "indulge their own desires," to buy without much thought or reflection.33 Such encouragement might have released unsettling impulses, leading some women to shoplifting. Still other women, who enjoyed the benefits of the new liberal credit policies, might have

32 Mary Lester Harris Diary, Dec. 30, 1848, Harris Collection (Manuscripts Division, New-York Historical Society, New York City); Sophie C. Hall Diary, Monday morning, Jan. 1879 (Manuscripts Division, New York Public Library).
33 Dry Goods Economist, Sept. 15, 1894, p. 25.
bought compulsively; they might have confused the possession of goods with the fulfillment of their longing for happiness. The outcome in both instances might have been great psychological disorientation and intense marital and family conflict.

Throughout that period an increasing number of court cases pitted wives, who bought well beyond their means, against husbands, who refused to pay their wives' debts. Some judges ruled in favor of the husbands; they argued that the common-law concept of "necessaries," which required husbands to pay for their wives' bed, board, clothing, and so forth, did not cover the cost of fur coats and jewelry or of any other superfluous commodity. Other judges, who expanded the meaning of necessaries and thus elicited the thanks of merchants, backed the wives. Those cases as a whole illustrate the strain placed on marriage by the spread of credit and fashion and by the new abundance of commodities. Such new realities threatened the relatively stable equilibrium between the sexes that marked nineteenth-century social life.34

All women were potentially vulnerable to the perils of shopping, but most, it is probably safe to say, suffered very little from them. As the diaries of many metropolitan women of the upper-middle class indicate, many of those women were not so much disoriented by consumer life as fascinated with it and with the new opportunities for escape and pleasure. Marjorie Reynolds, a young New York woman, writes on February 18, 1908: "Gorgeous day, 5th Ave. a dream. To Wanamaker's alone for errand." And on April 2, 1909: "To Papa's office. Lunched with him at the Down Town Club with glee. . . . Thence uptown again. I love the whirl of these streets! Marianne down from Litchfield—met her at Altman's and had some confab." Mrs. George Richards, an affluent woman from upstate New Jersey, went shopping every second or third day. A few of her diary entries are as follows:

January 12, 1903. Mother and I to town on 10.57. Altman's, Arnold's. Lunched with Kate Mitchell at the Woman's Club, 9 E 46. Called then on Mrs. Hornblower, Wanamaker's, home on 5.15.


February 26, 1903. To town at 12:30. O'Neill's, Altman's. Lunch at tea rooms on 20th st. . . . Stern's, McCreery's . . . . home 4.55.


The Richards diary is remarkable for several reasons. It reflects the character of time in an upper-middle-class woman's life: flexible, fluent, unlike male work rhythms, although determined at its outer limits by male time. The diary is utterly unintrospective; it has virtually nothing in it but shopping dates and excursions, records of departures to and from Manhattan or Newark, ritual data of great importance to this woman. The diary shows how much Richards

did not like being cooped up at home. She spent much of her time in public—shopping.35

Even more interesting are the personal writings of Mary Antin and Marguerite Delavarre DuBois. Antin, a Jewish immigrant who came to the "Promised Land" in 1898, lived most of her youth in the Chelsea district of Boston. Every Saturday night she and her girlfriends would "march up Broadway, and [take] possession of all we saw . . . or desired," staying out "till all hours." They pressed their "noses and fingers on plate glass windows ablaze with electric lights and alluring with display." They inspected "tons of cheap candy, to find a few pennies' worth of the most enduring kind." Such experiences, Antin said, planted "treasures [in] my brain," which she later drew on as an adult. What were those treasures but the content of a new identity, a new kind of person who would regard the future as one of "shining," unfolding possibility. Blocking out the inequities and miseries that burdened the immigrant community from which she came, Antin compared her life to a "fairy story," observing how she moved from one "transformation" to another. "I have reached," she declared as an adult, "what was the second transformation of my life, as truly as my coming to America was the first great transformation." Part of that first transformation took place in a "dazzlingly beautiful palace called a 'department store,'" when she and her sister "exchanged our hateful homemade European costumes . . . for real American machine-made garments, and issued forth glorified in each other's eyes."36

A Manhattan teenager, DuBois lived with her working mother in a reasonably comfortable midtown apartment. On clear, bright days in 1907 when she was not learning French, sewing, or attending art classes, DuBois loved to go walking on Broadway, bounded on every turn by consumer institutions. For her, nearly every day in New York was "swell elegant," "peachy," "scrumptuous," and "glorious," especially those days that freed her to go into the streets. "I may as well take up residence on Broadway," she said in her diary, so often did she go abroad. Characteristically, she wrote: "Up early and went down to Myra's. We went downtown and shopped and walked up Broadway to Macy's—had more fun than a 'barrel of monkeys.'" DuBois's diary reports phone calls, outings with the camera, subway journeys to the new theaters and soda fountains, visits to the Knickerbocker and Waldorf-Astoria hotels, and, above all, shopping jaunts to such stores as Macy's, B. Altman, and James McCreery. She met her friends at the stores and ate with them in the store restaurants. She traveled the elevators and escalators to see the abundance of goods, and she witnessed the entertainment supplied by the stores to women who had the leisure to enjoy them.37

These diaries and autobiographical accounts show how far the secularization of thought and behavior had proceeded in the lives of many women, whose daily activity seems to have been barely touched by religious reflection or works of charity. Such accounts and diaries also display how much middle-class women had come to occupy and to move comfortably within the public domain. Their new freedom was made possible by the emergence of a quintessentially feminine world constructed around the commodity form that had come to dominate the urban scene by 1915. F. Laurent Godinez, one of the first important authorities on city street lighting, clearly hinted at that relationship when he wrote in 1914, "The American city is in a state of evolution, due largely to woman's influence, and there is a rapidly spreading sentiment to the effect that our cities . . . must be something more than bare shelters for enormous aggregations of humanity . . . . They must be places to live in . . . and must afford facilities for recreation and the attainment of an artistic ideal." Once considered only private beings with identities circumscribed by the limits of the domestic frontier, women had now entered a public space no longer principally masculine in character. Moreover, by 1920 many women, working in fashion and consumer industries, had acquired the power to shape in some degree the public culture of consumption. An utterly different social context had appeared, far removed from the early capitalist one John Mack Farragher describes in *Women and Men on the Overland Trail*, where men controlled the public life and where women's culture was tethered to the hearth. A public life in cultural tension in which the lives of women and men interfused and competed for influence had emerged.

The culture and institutions of consumption did much more, however, than make the lives of women more secular and public. As the women's personal statements also reveal, they drew women deeply into a new individualism founded on commodity consumption, not on the production of goods or on the individual ownership of property. Fostering the idea that women ought to be treated as individuals with special interests and with desires for comfort and pleasure, consumer service must have induced many women to believe that they ought to be served, not to serve others. In the minds of at least some women, that conviction had considerable implications for the sexual relation, suggesting that men ought to entertain and to serve women, not the other way around. The idea was to take its most extreme expression in an article by journalist Helen Lawrenson, written for *Esquire Magazine* in the 1930s. Lawrenson argued that the "new modern man" ought to imitate the "gigolo," because gigolos understand the "feminine yearning to get away from home" and "offer" women "the whole world as a playground." "Service for ladies is his watchword"; and his motto, "The customer is always right."39

The inventive, surreal, multicolored, and image-saturated texture of consumer life, the excitement of possibility inherent in the commodity form, the aura of fashion, the appeals of desire and fulfillment—all stimulated women to imagine a more varied range of individual expression and experience. An upsurge of longing, a diffuse desire for something better or, perhaps, a quest focused on a concrete change, was a hallmark of the consumer culture. In Florence Peck, a young librarian from Boston who knew consumer life very well, the longing assumed its diffuse form. "Have you ever had the desire," she mused in her 1903 diary, "the awful longing for something, some one that you could not have—away down in your heart—that dreadful longing for something, some one." DuBois, on the other hand, had a better grip on her dreams. After visiting the White Line Pier in New York, to watch the departure of the magnificent luxury liner Oceanic, she exclaimed, "Oh! Gee how I longed to stay on board—Just think what oodles and oodles of fun we'd have—With a heavy heart I left that ship. Oh! to be in Rome! London! and the Ocean just seems to call me!"40

The thought and behavior of American feminists before World War I also displayed the imprint of the culture of consumption. Feminist ideology, once partly based on the individualist demand that women be given independence through productive work, now began to absorb the newer individualist demand for greater sensual gratification and experience. That process is discernible as early as the late 1880s, when such leaders of the women's rights movement as Lucy Stone, Mary Livermore, Julia Ward Howe, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman joined the ranks of Nationalism, an indigenous socialist movement founded by Edward Bellamy, which put the department store at the core of its vision. Although most of the women of that movement did not discard older commitments to productive labor or to the belief in rational, well-balanced behavior, some of them did begin to reject inherited notions of thrift, temperance, and self-denial. Nationalist Jane Croly, a noted fashion columnist and a women's rights leader, declared that all men and women ought to have "'warmth, luxury, and the softness of blended colors, the freedom from the rude influences of life environed by material beauty and comfort'" and "'the right to participate in whatever life has to bestow.'"41

Many women who headed the woman movement in the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries felt unease and unrest in the face of the new culture. They struggled over its moral and social implications, the way it turned away from established traditions and settled forms and threatened to uproot women from traditional familial settings, making them vulnerable to exploitation in a new and anonymous communal forum. In the midst of the department store revolution in retailing, many women, from different

40 Florence Peck Diary, April 12, 1903 [Manuscripts Division, New York Public Library]; DuBois Diary, July 3, 1907.
perspectives within the woman movement, were fighting to erase prostitution, to eliminate the peddling of false images of women in the media, to protect women and children from the dangers of city life, and to legislate against intemperance. At the same time, suffragists and social reformers, as well as the "new feminists" of the early twentieth century, could hardly escape the impact of the culture of consumption, not a surprising fact given the magnitude of the changes then taking place. Often competing with the older faith in balance, symmetry, rational control, and loyalty to productive work, this culture was felt by different women in different ways. Nevertheless, we can see the power of the new experience breaking in on the political practice and social behavior of many feminist and suffragist women.

The mainstream suffrage publications, such as the Woman Voter, invited department stores to advertise in their pages. The Woman's Journal employed advertising agents. Ebulliently, suffragists emulated advertising strategies and purveyed the "art of publicity." They devised suffrage billboards and posters, calendars and movies and conducted great parades and pageants, which echoed those arranged by department stores and which "transformed" even the streets of Boston into "carnivals of color, sound, and animation." A purple, violet, and gold color scheme unified the Washington parade of 1913. "Yellow rallies" were held in New York with marchers wearing yellow capes and carrying "yellow balls of light in the shape of lanterns." In May 1914 twelve little girls dressed as butterflies, symbolizing the suffrage states, led decorated floats and bedecked automobiles in a handsome parade down the main thoroughfare of Louisville, Kentucky. Behind the girls trotted a little boy, consigned to the garb of a "gray moth, representing Kentucky just ready to emerge from its cocoon." Like liberal and leftist political activists in other countries, American feminists relied on an aesthetic politics of mass spectacle that imitated the practices forged by the urban merchant class. Suffragists used advertising space in the streetcars, where they tacked up "vivid yellow, black, and white placards." With the willing consent of department stores, they decorated store windows in the "colors of the Suffrage Party." Stores everywhere volunteered their windows and their interiors for suffrage advertising. In June 1916 Chicago's Carson, Pirie Scott installed a wax figure of a suffragist in one of its windows, a herald of the coming convention of the Woman's Party in that city. At about the same time, Wanamaker's set a precedent by permitting all female employees to march in suffrage parades during working hours. In 1912 suffra-

Women and Department Stores

Woman's rights leaders published magazines that reflected the clear merger of feminism, marked by a secular, internationalist perspective, with the cosmopolitan, heterogeneous culture of consumption. The magazine Madame, printed in Indianapolis as the official organ of the National Council of Women, appeared in 1903. Nearly a cousin of Harper's Bazaar, Madame mixed articles on jewelry, cosmetics, food, theater, and department stores with descriptions of woman's advancement in public life. Also in 1903 the short-lived American Business Woman's Magazine, the first of its kind in America, was published in Denver, Colorado. It was followed in 1915 by a hardier version, Business Woman's Magazine, a Manhattan periodical that was kindred to the official bulletin of the National Federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs, the Independent Woman, in print four years later. Ardent defenders of women's right to have families and professional careers at the same time, both Business Woman's Magazine and the Independent Woman generously made space for articles on department stores, and both would have agreed with the Department Store, a fleeting and expensive retail journal of the time, that the department store constituted 'the first true expression of the cresting wave of feminism,' where women 'ruled' and were recognized as 'salesgirls, department heads, and buyers.' The two magazines promoted a liberal, individualistic feminism, and both described the business woman as the 'new feminist,' who sought to release herself from all fetters and to enjoy life to the fullest. 'The business woman it is who extracts from life its best flower and romance. The modern girl wants to come into contact with the live forces of the busy old world which is moving every day.'

Many of the newer feminists, who also worked for suffrage, had some connection with the commercial world, and still others were attracted to the urban centers, so revitalized by the 'palaces of consumption.' The novelist and feminist Edna Ferber, whose father owned a retail store, adored the consumer life, although she could be extremely critical of it as well. In 1916 Elsa Maxwell and Alva Belmont, the president of the Congressional Union for Woman Suffrage, wrote a fund-raising suffrage operetta, 'Melinda and Her Sisters,' an innovation perhaps never repeated. Maxwell, a feminist all her life, acquired fame as a columnist and party giver. The socialist-feminist Crystal Eastman worked for a while as director of the sales department of the Maxwell Automobile Company, which engaged fifty women on the same

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terms as its male employees to sell its cars. And, as the Woman's Journal contended, all female department store advertisers were suffragists.46

Of that younger generation of women, Rheta Childe Dorr and Inez Haynes Irwin exemplified most vividly in their behavior and beliefs the shaping power of the culture of consumption. Dorr was a militant feminist leader in the 1910s, editor of the Suffragist, the official organ of the Congressional Union for Woman Suffrage, precursor of the National Woman's Party. A socialist for a short while, she later denounced Bolshevism, in 1917, and campaigned for Warren G. Harding, in 1920. Dorr claimed her right to independence, her freedom to leave her family and home at any time for places unknown. As a child she had said, 'When I grow up if I don't like my family I won't live with 'em. If I don't like the town I live in I'll move away. I'm never going to have anything I don't want, and I'm never going to do anything I don't like, not so long as I live.' In 1890, against her family's opposition, she went to New York City to become an artist. Her exposure to the consumer life of the city must have completed her "transformation" into one of the new feminists, who increasingly tried to integrate an older interest in woman's public advancement with a new, passionate concern for personal enrichment and sensual expression. Dorr was an important consumer activist who joined other reformers in demanding better treatment of saleswomen in department stores; at the same time she was pleased to report that women, having "risen" in the stores, "keep on rising. One-fourth of the department store buyers and managers in the sixteen biggest stores on [Chicago's] State [Street] are women." Moreover, she could describe State Street, the major retail thoroughfare in Chicago, as a "pavilion where people ought to dance in the open air."47

Born in 1873, Irwin came from a genteel, New England middle-class family, which, significantly, made its living managing hotels in Boston, perhaps Irwin's first contact with modern consumer life. In the early 1900s she moved to Greenwich Village, wrote articles for the radical periodical the Masses, and joined the National Advisory Council of the National Woman's Party. Irwin's fame rests largely on her important history, The Story of the Woman's Party, but she also wrote many journalistic pieces and novels that showed her nearly uncritical approach to the culture of consumption. Like many of her contemporaries, Irwin seemed to lose touch with its grimmer side, its class character, the way it depended on discipline and exploitation, and, above all, the way it seemed to threaten fragmentation and disorientation. She was so fascinated by the tendency toward play and leisure in this culture that she confused work with play. For example, after spending a year in California, she wrote in 1916


Irwin was convinced that women could achieve true humanity and modernity only by living in the cosmopolitan city with its wealth of consumer institutions. Her novel The Lady of Kingdoms depicts the emerging liberation of her female characters as they abandon what she describes as the provincial and sexually "starved" life of a small country town for the "seething" pleasures of "metropolitan experience." Her main heroine, Southward Drake, epitomizes the new feminist of the day. She has money and a driving need for independence. Restless and athletic, slender and beautiful, she yearns for unknown and vital experience. As the novel begins Southward is living in her grandparents' mansion in rural Connecticut, where she has fashioned for herself a fantastic "garret" high up in the house, well beyond the reach of her family. Southward consumes the novels of Jules Verne and the early fairy tales of H. G. Wells in this secluded place, which has all the trappings of a cosmopolitan dream. The decor mixes Occidental with Oriental motifs; the walls are covered with colorful crepe, turning the room into a rajah's quarters. "It makes me think of the Arabian Nights," observes one of her few visitors. Here Southward dons Chinese clothes taken from the family trunk: a "tomato-coloured prince's coat" and "a high Chinese head-dress" with feathers and flowers, "many coloured silk pompons," and "streamers of silk trimmed with mirrors."\footnote{Inez Haynes Irwin, The Lady of Kingdoms [New York, 1917], 24, 99–103, 472, 475.}

Toward the middle of the novel, Southward has found her emancipation in New York, surfeited with skyscrapers, theaters, restaurants, dinner parties, and department stores, all of which are described in the book. She has encountered intellectual and sexual freedom. She has discovered and realized her true self. But, then, all Irwin's major female characters in the novel experience their true selves in the city, are transformed by the "seething quality of its social life," its "gorgeous restaurant night life." Even the most dour, Dickensian woman in the novel, Mrs. Crowell, mother of Southward's best friend, Hester, undergoes a dramatic conversion. Trapped in a "little dead country village," Mrs. Crowell seems buried under the weight of puritan repression and fear and of outmoded family conventions; but, in San Francisco, where she has gone with her emancipated daughter at the end of the novel, she lives through a great change. Together, the Crowells "[wander] about the streets of the shopping districts, gazing into the windows that offer the stranger unlimited entertainment." At night, before going home, they pass "through the department-store area, staring into the big lighted windows where groups of wax figures [display] the latest fashion caprice from Paris." They enter the glories of Chinatown, startled by the "vegetable shops, meat
shops, fish shops, crowded with familiar wares in strange shapes; the side streets papered for intervals with scarlet posters . . . the constant procession of men in all possible variations of Oriental and Occidental wear."

After feeling the accumulated power of a series of such experiences, Mrs. Crowell says to her daughter, "I feel . . . as though I'd died and come to life in another world." As Irwin writes: "It was as though, having cast all the associations of her past life overboard, she were trying to fill out the shape of her soul with a new cargo, a cargo which should make up in degree of its colour and strangeness for all the lost greynesses and familiarities." Mrs. Crowell comes to accept the liberation of her daughter and begins to chart her own. She has forfeited "greyness" for color, taking part in a major ritual of transformation in a culture of consumption.

Irwin depicted journeys of transformation in her fiction that other American women took in real life. In those early, nearly euphoric days of consumer capitalism, textured so much by the department store, many women thought they had discovered a more exciting, more appealing life, freedom remade within a consumer matrix. Their participation in consumer experience challenged and subverted that complex of qualities traditionally known as feminine—dependence, passivity, religious piety, domestic inwardness, sexual purity, and maternal nurture. Mass consumer culture presented to women a new definition of gender that carved out a space for individual expression similar to men's and that stood in tension with the older definition passed on to them by their mothers and grandmothers. This tension, clearly established in that transformative moment in history, would take many forms but would remain a fixed and fundamental part of female experience for decades to come.

50 Ibid., 213–45, 468–72, 475.
51 Ibid., 471–72.