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## Creating The Self: Women Artists In Twentieth-Century Fiction

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CREATING THE SELF: WOMEN ARTISTS IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY FICTION

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## DEDICATION

To my favorites, Errol and Will.

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Writing a dissertation seems like a very solitary process, but I couldn't have completed it without the aid of friends, family, and mentors. This dissertation is as much a product of my labor as it is a product of their love and encouragement. I am thankful for my committee of brilliant, generous faculty: Greg Forter, Brian Glavey, and Yvonne Ivory. I am forever indebted to Catherine Keyser, whose indefatigable spirit gave me hope that not only could I indeed finish and graduate but that I actually had something worth saying. I admire her ability to provide incisive but kind feedback on even the roughest of drafts, and I am grateful for all the time she spent with me over the course of this project. My menagerie of friends motivated me and propped me up with love: Ali Arant, Barbara Bolt, Jamie Boyle, Emily Rendek, Graham Stowe, and Katherine Upton. These friends have enriched my scholarship and my life.

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## ABSTRACT

In novels of artistic development (or *künstlerromane*) by women in the early twentieth-century, becoming an artist is intimately tied to becoming recognized as an individual. It would appear that an era of rapid change and expanding opportunities for women would result in affirmative narratives of women's artistry, but studying texts by Edith Wharton, Anzia Yeziarska, Zelda Fitzgerald, and Dawn Powell shows that stringent gender roles can still keep women from realizing artist success.

In Wharton's *The House of Mirth*, Lily Bart ruins her prospects on the marriage market by striving for freedom and aesthetic pleasure. Those desires cannot be reconciled with the very real necessity of marriage for financial and social stability, so she finds that her artistic desires are incompatible with her station. Yeziarska's *Hungry Hearts* and *Bread Givers* promote the importance of self-making for becoming a scholar or artist. Her heroines all yearn to be legible as American, and Yeziarska's unique take on the *künstlerroman* requires community engagement in order for inspiration to strike. In Fitzgerald's *Save Me the Waltz*, Alabama Beggs presents a proto-feminist slant on artistic development. In the face of stringent opposition by her peers and her artist husband, Alabama decides to fail spectacularly both as a dancer and as a wife and mother, thus asserting her agency and defying social strictures that would attempt to determine her behavior. Powell's *Ebie Vane* swings between high and low culture in *Angels on Toast*, ultimately finding that modernity's promises to woman are a lie: Ebie

can choose neither love nor career without making distasteful sacrifices, and she certainly can't have both. Key to all of these artist-heroines' journeys is failure. These modern *künstlerromane* dramatize the difficulty of women attempting to enter the public sphere as artists when they are not recognized as autonomous individuals or are instead consumed as art objects.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

The figure of the artist in fiction is lonely, and a typical *künstlerroman* (artist's novel) traces a journey away from society toward artistic enlightenment (Lewes x). The *künstlerroman* is an overwhelmingly male-dominated genre, though, and men artist-heroes aren't perfect analogues for women artists. In *künstlerromane* by modern American women writers, marital prospects, domestic duties, and sentimental attachments complicate the drive for independence. In spite of their access to the public sphere, and sometimes in spite of their commercial success, the protagonists of novels by Edith Wharton, Anzia Yeziarska, Zelda Fitzgerald, and Dawn Powell struggle to view themselves as autonomous individuals, let alone as artists. Their modern *künstlerromane* dramatize the conflicts facing modern women who would like to enter public life. In contemporaneous *künstlerromane* by modernist men, such as James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as Young Man* and F. Scott Fitzgerald's *This Side of Paradise*, solitary artistic genius prevails against all odds. But these texts by and about women show that women do not get to laud their own achievements. They flirt with failure—whether in the marriage market or the aesthetic sphere—and they find that they have to compromise rather than renounce domestic attachments. Edith Wharton's Lily Bart dies; Anzia Yeziarska's Sara Smolinsky is drawn back into service for her tyrannical father; Zelda Fitzgerald's Alabama Beggs abandons the ballet; Dawn Powell's Ebie Vane tries to keep house instead of pursuing commercial art. These protagonists show that the process of

becoming an artist as a woman requires an amount of sacrifice. Artistic development costs them relationships, social standing, career opportunities, and even bodily control. I argue that in the form of these failures and compromises, we can see these texts' feminist commentary on the cultural pressures that restrict women to the roles of art object or domestic helpmeet. These women writers demonstrate that women cannot retreat from community and domestic attachments and thus provide us with a new, less isolated version of the *künstlerroman*.

The *künstlerroman* traces its origins to German Romanticism. Darby Lewes pinpoints the birth of the genre at the publication of Goethe's *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* in 1795. Lewes argues that from this point onward, artist-protagonists were characterized as lonely outcasts, skirting society in an effort to develop a rich interior life that would lead to great art (x). Maurice Beebe's *Ivory Towers and Sacred Founts* pursues the idea of the Divided Self, suggesting that "the artist is pulled in both directions simultaneously because his needs as a human being are not those of his creative self" (308). Perhaps being an artist always entails a tug-of-war between these two impulses, but for early twentieth-century women, the pull is intensified by the domestic expectations associated with gender norms and the promise of modernity. To become an artist, the (masculine) hero must "test and reject the claims of love and life, of God, home, and country, until nothing is left but his true self and his consecration as artist" (Beebe 6). The women artist-heroines I discuss find that they do not have the luxury of solitude. When these women attempt to leave the mundane affairs of daily life behind them, they suffer for it. When they pursue their desire to become an artist, they find themselves in conflict with the demands of home and marriage. What seems like a fairly

straightforward personal goal instead becomes a transformation or even dismantling of gender norms, rendering these artist-heroines illegible and undesirable.

While Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar view the failure of the artist-heroine as a sign that her desire for creativity has been repressed, resulting in aesthetic “frigidity,” I am interested in how failure is enacted in these plots and what it can teach us about women’s roles in the modern (182). Each of the writers in my study dramatizes irreconcilable options: Lily Bart joining Selden’s Republic of the Spirit or the marriage market, Yeziarska’s heroines either joining “America” or staying within their ethnic communities, Alabama Beggs dancing in the ballet or serving as her husband’s muse, and Ebie Vane working in the city or retiring to suburban domesticity. Gilbert and Gubar write that women’s *künstlerromane*, unlike their male equivalents, often center on “would-be” artists “in order to record the problems posed by the renunciation of artist desire” (183). Though Gilbert and Gubar take a psychoanalytic approach to explore artist-heroines’ interiority, I shift my attention to the manner in which these artists are perceived in the public sphere and how those expectations conflict with their creative desires. In lieu of focusing on the “would-be,” I am concerned with the ways in which these artist-heroines *do* become artists and how their peers continue to view them instead as art objects.

My work builds upon the feminist intervention of Linda Huf’s *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Woman*, which establishes “the practical impossibility of being both selfless helpmeet and committed craftsman,” both “caterer and creator” (6). Huf observes a key element of plotting in the *künstlerroman* centered around the woman artist, namely that men “are despots or dunces who drag her down” (9). For all of the

women artists I'll discuss, a man is the barrier to meeting artistic and personal goals. Lily Bart is badly used by Gus Trenor and discarded by Lawrence Selden; Sara Smolinsky butts up against her oppressive patriarch; Alabama Beggs sees her body appropriated by her husband for his own art; and Ebie Vane is emotionally and professionally paralyzed by her lover. While Yeziarska's Shenah Pessah does gain something from a man, it's actually the act of falling in love and being heartbroken that inspires her, rather than the man himself. In short, one of the greatest obstacles for women artists in *künstlerroman* is men—fathers, husbands, lovers, etc.—who try to trap women from becoming fully-realized individuals and artists. This is a significant reversal of the typical androcentric *künstlerroman* in which the opposite sex serves as valuable muse, aiding the effort to create art, not thwarting it.

Huf shares my sense of the *künstlerroman*'s political sensibility, citing "its radicalism," which she identifies as a rallying cry "for the smashing of the man-forged manacles on her sex" (5). This is an exciting call-to-arms, which represents an energy typical of the time of her writing—the urge to assign proto-feminist ideals to older texts was surely inescapable for a feminist critic in the 1980s. But I find that these twentieth-century texts don't feature much smashing. Rather, in an effort to carve out a space for themselves, these artists lose something of themselves. Lauren Berlant explains that to become somebody in the public sphere necessitates loss, "the destruction of one element for the production of another" (Berlant 210). Thus, Lily's *tableau vivant* is both artistic triumph and social ruin, Sara's professional aspirations are tempered by familial loss, Alabama's body is ripped apart beyond recognition, and Ebie's commercial art career is the result of dashed Bohemian dreams.

In my emphasis on the challenge that autonomy poses to the modern woman artist in the *künstlerroman*, I build upon recent feminist work on women's novels of development structured around female characters. Roberta Seelinger Trites identifies a type of feminist *künstlerroman* in children's literature that focuses on young women writers. Each of the girl characters Trites studies "changes her perception of herself and her world by writing" (65). In other words, the heroines find themselves as individuals via their art (Trites 79). However, these young writers are often hampered by love plots or community engagements that limit or negate their primary identification as artist (Trites 64, 69). As I will demonstrate in the following chapters, achieving identification as an artist is difficult because these artist-heroines must first assert themselves as autonomous individuals, free from narrow gender roles. These women artists must fight for recognition both as individuals and artists. Dana Heller notes that in a typical quest-romance, which follows a similar trajectory as the *künstlerroman*, women may serve as muse, but never the lead figure, suggesting that "identity *is* an exclusively masculine attribute," and women are "significant only in relation to the heroes whose identities they strengthen: they have no desires except to be chosen and adored by heroes" (4). In short, women have been bit players in these sorts of narratives, "blocked from identifying themselves with the active subject [...] because they have internalized an image of themselves as passive objects" (Heller 6). At stake for these artist-heroines is a sense of self determined not by a public but by themselves. "The recognition of female autonomy," Gilbert and Gubar explain, was "crucial for twentieth-century women artists" (189). What I aim to show in these texts is that the woman artist is continually striving to assert herself both personally and artistically. The artist-heroines in these texts must

create themselves in order to create their art, and each of them struggles with their identity as an artist because it is in conflict with the prescription of womanhood they've been given.

Further complicating this struggle is the ways in which women's roles were continually shifting in this period. Martha Patterson calls the New Woman of the early twentieth-century "a distinctly modern ideal of self-refashioning," women responding to changing times by changing themselves (2). Patterson notes that increases in educational attainment, divorce rates, birth control, suffrage, the advent of many women's clubs, and the temperance movement were important changes that led to women's involvement in the public sphere, but "the most demonstrable change in women's lives" was paid work outside of the home (8). Christine Stansell agrees, but also puts sexual freedom at the top of the list of important new opportunities for women. Key to all of these changes is one overarching freedom: the ability to leave the house. The modern woman "insisted on the freedom to conduct herself socially as she saw fit" (Schneider and Schneider 16). This would seem to indicate a paradigm shift, but difficulties remained. Engaging in the world outside the domestic sphere did not mean women's prescribed roles within that sphere disappeared. Modernity raised questions about women's roles and abilities, and "the assumed tension between the freedom and equality of women and the well-being of the family would remain the most frequent and effective argument against fundamental change for women" (Matthews 95). Even while new doors were opening, these vibrantly self-created New Women were expected to keep house. This tension plays out in these *künstlerromane* as the artist-heroines attempt to reconcile their ambition and modern opportunities with gender expectations. Lily learns that she cannot forsake personal

freedom for financial stability, especially if it requires a dull marriage; Sara, despite finding a position as a teacher and being entirely self-sufficient, feels inevitably drawn back to care for her ailing father who never supported her; Alabama's ballet technique improves as her social life and marriage disintegrate; and Ebie battles conflicting desires for the Greenwich Village lifestyle of an artist and the simple Midwestern home life of her youth.

These texts provide compelling examples of how the artist's development looks different when a woman is at the center. Community and domestic attachments replace isolation, and creating a self becomes a vital aspect of creating art. These narratives all chart a struggle to be recognized as an individual and as an artist, and the root of these struggles is anxiety about women's place in modernity and particularly within cultural production in the modern period. In *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, and Postmodernism*, Andreas Huyssen argues that women are associated with mass culture and thus excluded from high art and modernism. Rita Felski argues that for many male modernists, modernity was defined by nostalgia for "an imaginary edenic condition" symbolized by femininity (40). Felski finds that, as women were imagined as outside of time, they were also excluded from cultural production, not needing to make art because "she *is* art" (48). In the texts in my study, women artists are often relegated to commercial or mass culture (Yeziarska's heroines, Dawn Powell's Ebie Vane), and when they are not, they are objectified as muse or art object (Lily Bart, Alabama Beggs).

In the following chapters, sometimes "art" isn't quite recognizable as such—responding to their exclusion from high art, these women characters often turn their creativity toward the embellishment of their bodies and homes, attempting to create while

staying within the bounds of gender norms. Nicole Humble identifies this strategy as resistance to a “pro-domestic ideology.” Middlebrow novels, she explains, subvert this ideology and “claim a woman’s ability to ‘home-make’ as an art form, offering the middle-class housewife an imaginative allegiance with the bohemian creative artist” (3). This allegiance is superficial, though, and while “art” is visible in unlikely places, it gets these women artists no closer to realizing the freedom and recognition they strive for.

In *The House of Mirth* (1905), Edith Wharton gives us a would-be artist in the form of Lily Bart, whose rich interior life prevents her from making an advantageous match on the marriage market. Lily yearns to join Lawrence Selden’s “republic of the spirit,” but her financial dependence limits her mobility. Each time Lily follows her own inclinations—whether stopping for tea at Selden’s apartment or loitering in the woods instead of meeting Percy Gryce—proves to be a grave misstep on the path to financial and social security. Her inability to marry up centers on her artistry—Lily is artist, art object, and even art dealer, and juggling these roles proves impossible.

First, Lily constantly situates herself in aesthetically pleasing surroundings. She spots a pastoral scene, decides her presence would increase its value, and positions herself attractively. Lily is hyper-aware of the possibilities of her scenery and knows how to present herself within it. She arranges and highlights natural beauty and is deeply invested in her own beauty, thus acting as both artist and appraiser. This role is complicated by the necessity of succeeding on the marriage market. In order to seem marriageable, Lily must present herself as an object available for purchase. However, Lily turns herself into an art object while remaining in control of her representation, making choices that render her less valuable as a marriageable commodity. The apex of



Lily's artistic achievement is the tableaux vivants scene, in which she strikes a pose meant to resemble a famous painting. Lily's own beauty and charm overwhelm the original work, however, so that Lily herself becomes the center of attention and a work of art unto herself. This scene sets Lily far apart from her peers—Lily has outshone them as an artist, but has removed herself from their circle as a result. Lily is simply too good, her imaginative capacities too great, for her to be considered a marriageable object or for her to be satisfied with a contractual marriage. In short, when Lily succeeds in identifying herself as autonomous artist, her status as a consumable object on the marriage market becomes questionable. Lily's choices to seek and luxuriate in beauty cost her, because she does not understand the marriage market. This problem becomes literal when Lily finds herself ten thousand dollars in debt to Gus Trenor due to a naiveté about investment returns. By failing to capitalize on her beauty, Lily destroys her marketability and eventually herself. Her desire for freedom and beauty cost her because those desires cannot be reconciled with the necessity of marriage for financial and social advantage among women in her social set.

Anzia Yezierska's *Hungry Hearts* (1920) and *Bread Givers* (1925) feature protagonists much less privileged than Lily Bart, yet they, too, find their artistic talents and goals at odds with societal expectations. Before attempting to develop as an artist, each woman must first prove herself an individual. Sara Smolinsky, protagonist of the novel *Bread Givers*, is obsessed with one goal: to “make myself a person” (172). While Lily Bart aims to retain control of herself as an art object, Sara instead wants to become a fully-fledged subject. The process of becoming a person is crucial to these protagonists' intellectual and artistic development, and Yezierska shows that the process is a difficult

one. Before they can fine-tune their talents, first they must realize they're capable of doing anything outside of the role they're expected to play. Discovering their voices and individualism is a vital part of their artists' journeys. Achieving selfhood and then leaving the domestic sphere are two steps that are overlooked and taken for granted in a male-oriented narrative. Yeziarska shows that in addition to the intensive self-making required for an immigrant woman to become "a person" in America, becoming legible as a person requires a sense of belonging to a larger national or ethnic community.

Unlike a traditional *künstlerroman*, Yeziarska's narratives do not couple individuality with isolation. Rather, these women artists are dependent upon community support for their artistic development. Yeziarska's take on the *künstlerroman* requires her artist-heroines to engage with their community for inspiration. This same community has the ability to drain them of energy and resources, however. As Yeziarska illustrates in the *Hungry Hearts* short stories "How I Found America" and "Wings," gaining inspiration and a sense of belonging comes at the price of heartbreak; only in the process of developing an infatuation with an intellectual American man and being crushed by his rejection do these characters discover the abilities latent in themselves and seize a place in America. Yeziarska suggests that sentimental attachments can have a key role in grasping modern opportunities, so her artist-heroines veer sharply away from the solitary genius model and instead become artists when they achieve a sense of belonging.

Yeziarska's heroines have hope despite dreary circumstances, but Zelda Fitzgerald offers a much glummer picture of the artist's development. *Save Me the Waltz* (1932) is Fitzgerald's only novel, and it follows the story of a ballet dancer whose career is curtailed by her husband's control and her own punishing training. Fitzgerald uses

grotesque metaphors of meat and machinery to describe the transformation that Alabama's body undergoes, and while this artist-heroine comes closest to achieving public success, she also becomes increasingly distanced from her own body. Alabama, too, struggles with the location of the line drawn between artist and art object. At one point, Alabama describes her body as "like a gored horse in the bull ring, dragging its entrails" (154). The metaphor is disgustingly specific, locating her drive and desire in the ripped apart, leaking body of the horse. The horse has been sacrificed much like Alabama: both offer their bodies to the public arena and both are made vulnerable by their location there. The horse will likely not survive his performance, and Alabama comes out of her professional debut with an infection in her foot that is fatal to her career. Alabama works to transform herself into art, but she fails. Her failure also has transformative properties, however.

Failure is the chief attribute of Fitzgerald's artist-heroine. Alabama Beggs fails spectacularly at her artistic and domestic attempts. She can't open a can of beans properly, and she certainly knows nothing about having a child (Fitzgerald 51, 46). As a wife and mother, she is willfully ignorant; as an artist, her body betrays her. Yet, her will to fail allows her the opportunity to claim agency. I use Jack Halberstam's concept of shadow feminism to explain Alabama's deliberate failure. Rather than fight for her ballet career or fight against her husband's will make her a housewife, Alabama leans into her failure. Halberstam asks us to look for the transformative potential in failure, suggesting that it's possible to enact a subversive form of resistance against power structures that would otherwise seem too imposing to bear. Halberstam argues that shadow feminism requires "undoing, unbecoming, and violating" (4). By refusing to become any of the

roles open to her, Alabama successfully resists becoming a consumable art object, even as she “unbecomes” herself.

Finally, I will discuss the little-studied *Angels on Toast* (1940) by Dawn Powell, a novel which provides us with a sharp-witted, fast-talking, but ultimately gloomy working woman as protagonist. *Angels on Toast* blatantly and even aggressively mocks middle-class domesticity by making it the reluctant choice of its protagonist, Ebie Vane. The novel troubles the distinction of public and private by questioning what a home truly is. Powell gives us examples of not-quite-homes in the Castles-in-the-Woods resort, Ebie’s studio/apartment, and later Ebie’s dilapidated country house and potential tea room. Domesticity, as Powell paints it, isn’t the cozy private sphere ideal it claims to be.

If domesticity is a lie, Ebie shows us that distinctions between high and low art are just as dishonest. Though she once had dreams of being an artist, she scoffs that highbrow art and culture amounts to “too much spinach” (599). Just the same, Ebie chastises herself for giving up her dreams to become a commercial artist. *Angels on Toast* charts Ebie’s movement among artistic tiers and home spaces, and she is not stationary for long. Ebie represents the possibilities open to modern women, but her discontent indicates that these possibilities give false hope. Powell couches Ebie’s misery in a critique of the middlebrow, showing that Ebie’s choice to follow love and forsake career is a sentimental disaster, while commercial art requires associating with inane fools. Ebie compromises in both love and career, opting for choices that are not particularly ambitious, leaving her unfulfilled. Whatever path Ebie takes, developing her artistic potential or using her given talents for profit, will not shield her from unhappiness.

I do not mean only to provide a broadened understanding of a genre or to recuperate underappreciated texts—these writers and their artist-heroines are part of a conversation about women’s roles and opportunities and the balance between personal and professional lives that is going on to this day. In 1982, Helen Gurley Brown claimed that women could “have it all,” and decades later, we’re discovering we can’t. The price is too high, the struggle insurmountable. These artist-heroines show how the social construction of womanhood impedes artistic achievement, and we can easily spin their struggles out to the contemporary problem of work/life balance. Anne-Marie Slaughter’s essay “Why Women Still Can’t Have it All” for *The Atlantic* went viral, and I think it’s because the promise of modernity for women is as yet unfulfilled. Though Slaughter’s piece wasn’t focused on creative (and/or largely unremunerative pursuits), the premise applies to these fictional women, too: balancing a career is at odds with being not just a wife and mother, but with being a fully-realized individual in America. Our browsers are crowded with think pieces about how minimum wage can’t cover the average rent in most cities, the cost of child care is keeping women out of the workforce, the influence of unions is steadily decreasing, and no one takes vacation. In short, it’s nearly impossible to have the family, the home, and the personally gratifying pursuits and make money and elevate your socioeconomic status at the same time. The women artists I study here grapple with this problem with varying results.

I will show how these texts trace a bumpy road to artistic achievement. These artist-heroines discover that they must find themselves and assert their autonomy while developing as an artist simultaneously. They must first be recognized as autonomous individuals, not objects. This version of the *künstlerroman* journey requires them to be

and have it all, and this complicated “becoming” is relevant to our current conversation about work/life balance. As American women and men struggle to be individuals in a regimented capitalist culture, it is useful to look back at examples like those given by these texts. These fictional heroines who try to “have it all”—be recognized as artists and adhere to gender norms—do so in spite of the fact that before they can have “it all,” they must first overcome barriers to their recognition as people. As I will discuss, there are myriad barriers to achieving these goals, and the ultimate choice these artists must make is art over love and family, or in Huf’s words, choosing “self-assertion” over “self-sacrifice” (119).

## CHAPTER 2

### LILY BART THE ARTIST AND ART DEALER IN *THE HOUSE OF MIRTH*

Early on in *The House of Mirth*, Lawrence Selden proclaims that Lily Bart is an artist, but if this is so, where is her canvas? (Wharton 79). As we watch her navigate the marriage market of Gilded Age New York society, Lily proves herself to be particularly adept at painting herself into an elaborate landscape that sets off her natural charms, but her artistic feeling is also her downfall. Though Edith Wharton gives us a pointed critique of high society and women's place in it, she also paints for us the tortured choice between what is profitable and what is beautiful; for Lily, what is socially advantageous is usually at odds with what she finds most stimulating and beautiful. In many respects, Lily Bart is an artist—crafting herself into a stunning objet d'art (literally, in the case of the tableaux vivants scene)—who is also forced to be her own dealer, subjecting herself to the vagaries of a tough market.

Lily Bart tries to maneuver the marriage market successfully, but her lofty ideals prevent her from making an advantageous match. Though Lily's charms should aid her in securing a spouse, those same charms are aligned with a love of natural beauty that keeps her striving for more than a socially and financially desirable marriage. In privileging her longing for beauty over social reality, Lily discovers the limits for women in her position: she must navigate tensions between upper class distinction and aesthetic ideals, or else lose the possibilities of either. Via Lily Bart, Wharton highlights a continuing concern for the women writers I will discuss. Anzia Yezierska will trouble

her heroines with the warring desires for career success and belonging; Zelda Fitzgerald's Alabama Beggs struggles to become a prima ballerina within the confines of an oppressive and competitive marriage; and Dawn Powell charts the incompatible trajectories of domestic bliss and self-sufficiency. Wharton anticipates these struggles by placing the intensely feeling and desiring Lily Bart in a series of cold transactions on the marriage market.

Reading Lily as an artist of and on the marriage market requires expanding "art" to mean both self-construction and the adoption of aesthetic ideals. In short, Lily is both the artist and the art object here. This generous reading of Lily and broad definition of art is not unsupported: Emily Orlando's study of Wharton and art claims that Wharton "positions herself in a predominately male (and modernist) tradition" of ekphrasis (7). Orlando argues that "her fiction voices a dissatisfaction with the objectification and sexualization of women as objects and not agents—as representations rather than *representers*," and so Wharton "negotiates a space for female creativity," as feeble as it may seem (Orlando 3, 11). As I will show in subsequent chapters, self-making and art-making are inextricably linked for these female characters whose personal development and freedom must be secured along with artistic freedom. To become an artist necessitates becoming an individual, and both trajectories are severely stunted for women in the early twentieth century, though by Powell's *Ebie* there is some shifting and expanding of opportunities.

Lily Bart's emotional life is deeply rooted in ideas of freedom and joy, yet the lifestyle and social sphere she clings to is at odds with her creative nature. In a novel where everything seems to be a business transaction, there is little room for inspiration,



romance, or aesthetic ideals, but Lily tries to carve out a space. It is this extreme effort that makes Lily special. Central to my reading of *The House of Mirth* is Wharton's focus on beauty and affect as a means of drawing Lily apart from her peers. It is Lily's appreciation and deployment of her own beauty in accord with the natural beauty around her that makes Lily distinctively different. Critic Alan Bourassa's reading of the novel also invests importance in Lily's beauty and her affective labor, though he focuses more on Lily's lost potential. He argues that Lily's moral awakening would not be possible without her failure to succeed in marriage, a potentiality that came with certain restrictions. In Lily Bart's character, "Beauty is given a power, not just to attract, please, or manipulate, but to cross over into that realm—the right and the wrong—from which it seems to be most severely excluded" (Bourassa 194). And yet, it is Lily's mismanagement of her own beauty that leads her to a dead end (literally). Had she focused her beauty on its manipulative properties, she would have succeeded on the marriage market. Of course, within a few pages she'd be Mrs. Percy Gryce and she'd experience a different kind of death. What Bourassa sees as lost potential is also just a different choice—to use her beauty's power for securing a boring husband instead of enjoying it or executing it in a more pleasurable manner would require rejecting a central piece of herself and her ideals. Lily's mother bemoans the fact that Mr. Bart's love of poetry diverted his attention for more profitable schemes, but Lily herself "was fond of pictures and flowers, and sentimental fiction" and believes those tastes mark her as smarter and more refined (Wharton 52-53). Lily's fondness for lovely things of little material value puts her directly at odds with the calculations of the marriage market, in which prettiness is quickly appraised.

Lily is often described as an object or a static piece of art, and this language is tied up in the language of value and cost. Early in the novel, Selden surmises that a great beauty like Lily certainly must have “cost a great deal to make,” and this language is repeated throughout the novel as her beauty and charms are prized and evaluated along with her fluctuating value on the marriage market (Wharton 27). Lily’s unique characteristics and talents are constantly referred to as “art.” She has the “art of blushing” (28), and a special art of pouring tea (39-40), as well as “her usual arts” of politeness and charm (105). “Lily’s arts” are tools for managing the men in her social group (133) as well as disarming the critical eyes of women. Her arts are consistently referred to throughout Book I, but such diction is largely absent from Book II. The language of art disappears after her artistic triumph, her tableau vivant.

As if in preparation for the tableaux, Lily spends the first half of the novel posing and embellishing herself. She is always the center of attention and the center of the scene. She readily admits to Selden that “the clothes are the background, the frame” (Wharton 33). Lily herself is the chief subject as well as the artist. This is most evident in the gardens at Bellomont in which she sets the scene, arranging herself in a pre-existing landscape. Finding an idyllic spot, Lily poses and waits to be captured by an appreciative viewer: “The spot was charming, and Lily was not insensible to the charm, or to the fact that her presence enhanced it; but she was not accustomed to taste the joys of solitude except in company, and the combination of a handsome girl and a romantic scene struck her as too good to be wasted. No one, however, appeared to profit by the opportunity” (Wharton 75). Lily herself is an expert at appraising beauty—she knows that however lovely the garden may be, she represents added value. Furthermore, she

recognizes that there is something to be gained from viewing the scene she now features in, both for herself and the would-be viewer. She has both drawn the scene and assessed its market value. However, this scene does not attract an audience, so her next scene caters more to her personal tastes than that of a potential “buyer.” She next chooses a spot down a country lane that serves as “background to her own sensations,” identifying something about herself in the scenery that reflects and complements not just her looks but also her feelings. Significantly, this spot is slightly farther removed from Bellomont’s gardens, at the juncture of woods and meadow. “The landscape outspread below her seemed an enlargement of her present mood, and she found something of herself in its calmness, its breadth, its long free reaches” (Wharton 77). Lily has an affective response to nature. In this line, Lily’s interiority is somehow on display through nature. Even Selden notes the strange unity between Lily’s silence and nature: “her quick-breathing silence seemed a part of the general hush and harmony of things” (78). If Lily sees her mood in the landscape, we learn here that being removed from the constraints of upper class society is liberating for her. Even here, though, free from the necessity of creating a perfect, marriageable picture, she selects a background that fits her. Lily is essentially always framed, whether she is art for a buyer or for art’s sake, but she chooses the backdrop and the material.

Posing herself is one manifestation of Lily’s artistic sensibility; another is her desire that everyday life be aesthetically pleasing. Marriage for Lily represents not just financial security but also the satisfaction of her aesthetic desires. A married woman has the opportunity to reset jewels and renovate drawing rooms, and though Selden jests this is “the very thing you’re marrying for!” Lily indicates this *is* an aspect of life, and

conceivably marriage, that she cares about (Wharton 31). Décor is hugely important for Lily, as we see in her frustration with her aunt's bland home. Her "charmless" bedroom there does not highlight or even match her own beauty, and "the haunting sense of physical ugliness was intensified by her mental depression, so that each piece of offending furniture seemed to thrust forth its most aggressive angle" (Wharton 118). The furnishings seem ready to attack, pointing aggressively at Lily. Ugliness and dullness is apparently impossible to ignore, and her sour mood makes ugliness even uglier. This enacting of a pathetic fallacy also hearkens back to the manner in which the lush, verdant spot at Bellomont highlights her beauty and conveys her mood. Lily is deeply affected by the beauty, or lack thereof, around her.

Lily's presence heightens the ugliness or beauty of her setting, as would the presence of any work of art, but the most clearly articulated moment of Lily as artist is the tableaux vivants scene, in which she steps into a painting and effectually conquers it with her own beauty. To Selden, she presents not the Reynolds painting but a "portrait of Miss Bart," indicating that while she fails at the art of tableau, she succeeds at being herself, which also means succeeding at being a work of art, even if not the intended one (Wharton 138). Orlando argues that the Reynolds painting chosen by Lily is far more empowered than a typical Pre-Raphaelite choice would be. Instead of a wan, sensuous, sleeping beauty, Reynolds's *Portrait of Joanna Lloyd* stands confidently, alert and flush in a vibrant natural setting (Orlando 64). Not only is Lily's picture in contrast with the Pre-Raphaelite captive or passive women, it's also in marked contrast to the other tableaux vivants on display that evening; few women pose alone, and those that do are accompanied by elaborate make-up and props. However, "Lily's tableau draws attention

to Lily as artist and broadcasts her status as available” (Orlando 68). Even in this moment of personal and artistic triumph, she is being appraised, however. The men watching are evaluating her as they might a piece up for auction, and Rosedale openly names prices she could fetch as a piece of art (Wharton 158-159).

Lily is constantly being appraised. Even in the eyes of her own mother, Lily’s beauty held a material value: her attractiveness “was the last asset in their fortunes,” according to the late Mrs. Bart (Wharton 52). Early in the novel, Selden thinks of her as a precious artwork, which is further emphasized in the description of her hands, which are “polished as a bit of old ivory” (Wharton 29). Lily, over and over again, is portrayed as an art object, but the depiction is at least within her control. A successful marriage would restrict her to the role of the bought and collected art object, and it’s clear that Percy Gryce would have been incapable of appreciating Lily’s desires for “buoyancy” and “emancipation” (Wharton 78). As the owner of the highly valued Gryce Americana, he “values a thing for its rarity” without bothering to read it (Wharton 32).

Lily’s “rarity,” though intriguing to the potential buyer/husband, is the very thing that puts her in conflict with the market in which she participates. “Part of an endangered species, Lily is not so much a circulating commodity as she is a rare museum piece, desirable precisely because she is out of circulation,” claims Jennie A. Kassanoff (68). She argues that Lily is not capable of success on the marriage market because she really is not a part of that market at all. Instead, “Lily is of interest to the curator,” and she is an inhabitant of “a decadent house of mourning designed to preserve and exhibit a vanishing species” (Kassanoff 68). This, according to Kassanoff, is why Gryce finds Lily appealing and why Lily is destined for failure on the marriage market. Reading Lily as a passive

and rare artifact is difficult, however, precisely due to her active effort to engage him. Lily refers to her flirting with Percy Gryce “as a wayfarer picks up a heavy load and toils on after a brief rest” (Wharton 47). In fact, despite Lily’s treatment as an object, she is continually engaged in artistic labor. Her attractiveness is put to work so that it might serve her well: “her skill in enhancing it, the care she took of it, the use she made of it, seemed to give it a kind of permanence” (Wharton 65). Selden tells Lily that her greatest strength “lies in converting impulses to intentions” (Wharton 81). Lily is not merely an object for display; she is constantly *doing*, making herself into something beautiful and valuable.

Futhermore, her beauty has a utility. Her charm and beauty allow her to transform the people and settings around her. Selden says that Lily is “such a wonderful spectacle: I always like to see what you are doing” (79). Lily remarks that Selden is illogical—for by being at Bellomont, he has changed the itinerary he claims he wishes to observe—but Selden explains that “your taking a walk with me is only another way of making use of your material. You are an artist and I happen to be the bit of colour you are using today. It’s a part of your cleverness to be able to produce premeditated effects extemporaneously” (Wharton 79). Selden effectively re-conceptualizes Lily for the reader in this statement. Until this point, she has been artistic, perhaps, but she has been shown as a mere object bandied about on the marriage market. Here, however, Selden implies that Lily is an artistic laborer and a producer of something special, and he is the raw “material.” Selden and other admirers clearly take pleasure in her appearance, so her artifice in some ways contributes to both her market value as an object and her potential as an artist or skilled laborer. She transforms a lackluster tea on the train into something

fine and delicious, and Gryce exclaims it to be some of the best tea he's ever had (Wharton 39). However, while Lily can cast a glamour over simple Percy Gryce's tea, her deft handling of Selden's tea tray does not distract him from her discontentment.

Lily's unhappiness hinges on her inability to reconcile her participation in the marriage market with the artistic sensibility that helps her navigate it. Bourassa argues that emotion coupled with inwardness or interiority creates interesting, "realistic" characters (6). While I am not particularly concerned with Lily's qualities as a compelling or believable figure, our understanding of her choices is dependent upon this coupling. Bourassa defines interiority as "a kind of enfolded space that is an island of separateness in the world that surrounds it" (7). This space also "must be hidden" and "must be formed" (7). Describing interiority as "its own separate world" emphasizes the separateness of Selden's republic of the spirit and Lily's emotional life from their social lives (Bourassa 7). The marriage market and the capital are demarcated from the spiritual and emotional realm that Selden and Lily attempt to inhabit. This separation places emotional capital in a completely different world from the social, and the notion of separate atmospheres comes up as Lily attempts to cross from one to the other. Basking in the moneyed comfort of Bellomont, Lily reflects that this "atmosphere of luxury [is] the only climate she could breathe in" (Wharton 45).

Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* is marked by its focus on the market. Wai-Chee Dimock understands the novel as a series of business transactions because the marketplace provides a pervasive logic that shapes the entire narrative. The market reproduces itself in the language and logic of the novel and is therefore inescapable. Dimock argues that Selden does not want to marry Lily because "he cannot afford to"

(786). Specifically, Selden is unwilling to part with his spiritual/emotional capital—Lily is a risky investment, and he is wary of losing what he values as his prime asset. In other words, Selden wants a good exchange, one that is likely to pay off. Emotional capital is not just a concern of Selden's, however. Lily, too, seems loath to invest when she is unsure of the outcome, and she also has a rich interior life that values romance as much as material wealth.

Over the course of the novel, Lily pays, trades, and pays some more. Lillian S. Robinson agrees with Dimock that the “characteristic language” of the novel “is the language of business transactions” (349). Robinson looks at the ways in which Lily “pays” for her inclusion in high society as well as for her indiscretions. Despite her high value as a beautiful and fashionable socialite, Lily must pay quite a lot. Playing bridge is “one of the taxes she had to pay,” and “There were even moments when she was conscious of having to pay her way” through weekend visits to friends’ estates (Wharton 45). Helping Mrs. Trenor with hosting duties is disguised as a friendly favor, when it is in fact a requirement (57). She also has to pay what might be considered fines due to her beauty. Robinson explains, “Lily’s sexual attractiveness is undeniably a material asset in her struggle to improve her social and financial position through marriage. But ironically it is also a liability as long as it is not yet backed up by money and status” (347). In other words, a beautiful single woman is a risky investment if she has been on the market too long—her attractiveness makes her susceptible to gossip.

The language of capital is even threaded through Lily’s affective bonds. Bourassa highlights the importance of emotion in the plotting of novels, calling it “an essential building block” in the development of characters and “an engine, or a gravitational point,



pulling or driving the plot in myriad directions” (3). Bourassa explains that emotion is “the result of an investment of energy in a judgment, an image, a belief” (5). What is key here is his use of the word “investment.” Lily Bart tries to make a place in the market for herself that is less constricting than her circulation as a consumable object. To read her character in this way, we must consider that there are other, non-monetary investments that Lily can make. Selden claims to live a life of the mind and is chiefly concerned with emotional or spiritual capital. He is, in other words, investing energy instead of assets, and I would argue that Lily is doing the same.

Lily Bart appears to pay numerous fees for her participation in leisure-class pursuits. But Lily’s chief role is circulating in an upper-class marriage market. Her role in the marketplace is that of an object available for “purchase” through a marriage contract. Yet, Lily consistently engages in what seems to be self-sabotage. She neglects her engagements with Percy Gryce, the first suitor in the novel, and she outright refuses the advances of Sim Rosedale. The novel traces Lily’s declining value while also delineating Lily’s objections to the financially- and socially-motivated marriage that is expected of her. Lily’s inability to commit to these marital transactions is ostensibly a means of rejecting her status as object, but the diction of the novel squashes this little resistance. Throughout the novel, Wharton threads transactions, valuations, and market metaphors, even imbuing scenes of beauty and repose with cold calculations.

Language of waste and restraint, particularly, occurs throughout the novel, and most notably in descriptions of Lily. While Selden believes that Lily “must have cost a great deal to make,” he is still struck by the meaninglessness of the beauty and spectacle he enjoys in her presence, asking “was it not possible that the material was fine, but that

circumstance had fashioned it into a futile shape?" (Wharton 27). Lily's type of affective labor increases her desirability but also reduces any possibility for other engagement. Robin Peel also reads Lily's work as an indication of her wasted potential, arguing that "society is responsible for Lily's destruction because it has created a situation in which Lily has to tirelessly 'work' at the daily but frivolous task of being acceptable," and "it is a wasteful society that squanders the talents of its women in this way" (68). We must recall the earlier scene at Bellomont where Lily positions herself attractively in anticipation of a viewer—she identifies it as a wasted opportunity should no one appear to see her sitting there, enhancing the beauty of the natural setting. This labor—identifying the perfect spot, arranging herself just so, waiting for an appreciative audience—is named as potentially profitable and ultimately wasted (Wharton 75). If Lily continues to work without "pay," her situation on the market is untenable indeed.

Of all of the "transactions" in the novel, the one that comes closest to profitability occurs between Lily and Selden. While Lily seems to exist as a work of art solely for the consumption of others, she and Selden are able to find luxury in each other. In each other's company, they share a "luxury of enjoyment" (Wharton 76). This is an equal exchange, one which neither of them can experience with their respective paramours. Interestingly, even in this immaterial exchange, occurring in their private "republic" of lofty ideals, excess is prized. It is not enough to merely enjoy one another's company, but they must luxuriate in it, suggesting that simply spending time together would be lackluster. Even in their republic, they cannot escape the expectation of and taste for luxury, even if it's only between themselves.

Generally, luxury is entwined with dissatisfaction for Lily. Her confession to Trenor about her financial situation indicates Lily's awareness of the limitations of her station as a young, unmarried woman, but she seems even unhappier with her prospects as a married woman. Envious of Selden's flat, she remarks on her own misery, and settles into an armchair "in a luxury of discontent" (Wharton 28). This is a striking opposition to the "luxury of enjoyment" she feels with Selden later. Lily's ability to luxuriate in her emotions places her feelings within the confines of the market: feelings can be excessive, wasteful, and expensive. Her contentment later with Selden certainly does come at a steep cost—she loses her chance at a profitable marriage to Gryce because of her choice to spend time with Selden instead. Her discontentment at the start of the novel will eventually lead to her death, penniless and alone. She cannot afford to be unhappy in her social position—her desire to be happy leads her on a detour away from a match that is financially sound but dull (Gryce) or distasteful (Rosedale).

Lily's desires are complicated by her astute observation that in order to be unfettered from society's rules, one must be financially stable. However, for her to be financially stable, she must enter into an unappealing marriage. Though Lily's views on marriage to Gryce do not reflect a willingness to be an object of exchange, financial security certainly appeals to her. She dreams of "soar[ing] into that empyrean of security where creditors cannot penetrate" (Wharton 65). The imagery of flight appears in her conversations with Selden at Bellomont, and here "to soar" means financial freedom at the cost of all other freedoms. But Lily confides in Gus Trenor, "I *can't* make that kind of marriage; it's impossible" (Wharton 95). Lily yearns for something far greater than the type of marriage that could bring her financial reward. Not only does Lily want to

soar above her troubles, she believes that such a journey is possible with Selden. Her final correspondence with him before she sails for Europe with the Dorsets carries a significant seal: stamped in gray wax, her seal is a flying ship and the word “Beyond” (Wharton 156). Though Lily wants to soar out of reach of her creditors, she wants to go further—“beyond” to Selden’s mythical republic on a fanciful vessel. If this seal represents Lily’s dream, achieving it seems highly unlikely. The “luxury of discontent” accompanies money and unhappiness, whereas Selden’s apparently delightful “republic of the spirit” has no room for wealth or marriage—or for women. Like an unturned page in one of Gryce’s rare books, Lily’s interior life is unknown to all of her suitors. Her value on the marriage market is not determined by her emotional life, therefore it is suppressed.

Both Lily’s emotional life and her success on the marriage market are determined by her ambitions. Determining the place of romance in the novel very much depends on how one reads the plot. According to Peter Brooks, “plots are not simply organizing structures, they are also intentional structures, goal-oriented and forward-moving” (Brooks 12). Lily certainly appears to be motivated by her ambitions, but it is not always clear where those ambitions lead. In the beginning of the novel, at Bellomont, Lily has to make but one maneuver and she will become Mrs. Percy Gryce. But instead of wooing him with “her famous lashes drooped above a prayer-book,” Lily skips church and ends up spending the morning with Selden (Wharton 68). This is the moment we first see her interior life in conflict with the marketplace in which she is so deeply enmeshed. As Lily lounges on a convenient boulder with Selden next to her, “There were in her at the moment two beings, one drawing deep breaths of freedom and exhilaration, the other

gasping for air in a little black prison-house of fears” (78). Lily feels herself split in two—undoubtedly, the being about to asphyxiate is on the path to church with Percy Gryce. The happier spirit could perhaps be swaddled in wealth and influence, but the next line explains, “gradually the captive’s gasps grew fainter, or the other paid less heed to them: the horizon expanded, the air grew stronger, and the free spirit quivered for flight.” The image of the open sky here suggests some other possibility for Lily than a contractual marriage. The language of flight is mirrored in the conclusion of Book I: when faced with an unromantic, strictly profitable marriage proposal, Lily flees the country rather than consider accepting Sim Rosedale. Lily is not certain that she is falling in love with Selden, but she makes note of “the sense of lightness, of emancipation” she feels when she is with him (78). This “glow of freedom” is in direct opposition to the “little black prison-house of fears.” A morning (and a lifetime) with an ill-suited husband like Gryce would have been cramped, dark, and unpleasant. With Selden, however, she can dream of a future of unlimited possibilities, an ever-expanding horizon.

This imagery of mobility and flight suggests what many critics have found to be Lily’s attunement with nature. In a rare moment of uncomplicated happiness in the novel, Wharton uses metaphor from the natural world to describe Lily: “her beauty expanded like a flower,” “her face turned to him with the soft motion of a flower” (140, 141). As shown elsewhere in the novel, Lily’s beauty seems to be intensified when she is placed in a natural setting (even a faux or constructed nature, like the tableaux scenery or the Bellomont garden). Though her beauty increases, here it is important to note that her beauty is compared to that of flowers specifically, which is an impermanent kind of

beauty. Though this scene initially reads as romantic, it actually provides some grim foreshadowing. The tableau is Lily's pinnacle of artistic achievement, her relationship with Selden at its most satisfying point, and the novel past this point is filled with disappointment (social, romantic, financial, etc.). While visiting the Riviera, she is critiqued as being "dead [...] to art and poetry," and this throwaway gossip is chillingly accurate, because the moment the language of art drops out of the narrative is when Lily starts down the path that will lead to her death (Wharton 187). The moment Lily is identified as a flower is the last moment before her downfall gains momentum and sends her speedily to her deathbed. Wharton likens her grief at her financial and social situation to raindrops on a rose (Wharton 167). Kassanoff is interested in how "Lily's mysterious blend of the sylvan and synthetic captures natural perfection in the realm of aesthetic permanence" (63). But *impermanence* is the problem in the novel. The narrative even suggests her beauty was never meant to last: Lily "was like some rare flower grown for exhibition, a flower from which every bud had been nipped except the crowning blossom of her beauty" (Wharton 295). Lily's beauty and lively spirit fades over time, as would the beauty and life of a flower. And with the passing of time and the accruing of debt, the aesthetic pleasure others take from Lily's presence wanes. It also seems that rather than representing a blend of nature and artifice, Lily desires more alignment with nature than her carefully constructed social persona allows. It is only in her conversations with Selden that she appears "sylvan" in any way. Kassanoff suggests that Lily is a blend of natural and artificial qualities, picking up on a reference to Lily as a hot-house flower near the end of Book I and carrying it throughout her article. Peel adopts this metaphor, too, when she explains that Lily's potential is never realized

because she is “unfit for any world outside the hothouse in which orchids and lilies are cultivated,” suggesting the unlikeliness of Lily’s survival in an inhospitable clime (Peel 68).

While these critics emphasize Lily’s artificiality, I find that Lily is more frequently associated with the natural world; indeed, it is in nature that Lily’s artistry shines. When she skips church to walk through the garden at Bellomont, “every drop of blood in Lily’s veins invited her to happiness” (Wharton 72). Nature offers possibilities for expansion that Lily finds nowhere else. In gardens, Lily’s future no longer seems predetermined; in lieu of an oppressively gray marriage, she views the world as lush and fecund, promising limitless opportunities for freedom and beauty to unfold. Appreciated for her beauty, Lily does not often have opportunity to partake of beauty elsewhere. In this moment of solitude, Lily’s spirit is awakened not by jewels and finery, but that which cannot be quantified: nature. Though Lily’s circulation on the marriage market requires her to constantly assess and appraise herself, the place she is most content is outside of it, suggesting that her “art” is at odds with the market in which she’s attempted to sell it, so it shouldn’t be any wonder that she fails at it.

Lily seems happiest when she is outside and alone. This desire for solitude sets her apart from the rest of her class because, as Amy Kaplan notes, crowds and spectators are essential for reifying class, as conspicuous consumption and spectacles of leisure are integral to high society’s demarcation from the middle class. Lily is less concerned with public displays of beauty and leisure, though. During her European cruise, Lily “giv[es] herself up to a leisurely enjoyment of the spectacle before her” created not by society but by the sunlight playing on the water and the “finely penciled mountains” in the distance

(Wharton 189). Solitude and nature, notably in the garden path scenes at Belloment, continually allow for momentary escapes from the marriage market and the class system in which Lily finds herself caged. Lily is aware of the value added to the rustic path by her presence, but the fact that no one strolls by “to profit by the opportunity” suggests that Lily’s value and potential will only ever be wasted (Wharton 75).

This inability to profit is Lily’s downfall. Lily generally does not like assigning monetary value to art, or perhaps the type of art that would easily sell is beneath her: when Gerty Farish mentions that Annie Silverton may try to support herself by painting, Lily scoffs at the notion and nearly knocks over the tea setting in her anger. She notes that Annie’s paintings (“apple-blossoms on blotting paper,” nothing that seems particularly difficult or valuable) might be something she will have to lower herself to doing soon enough (Wharton 247). Lily’s disdain for those who would profit off mediocre art aligns her with a heroine I’ll discuss later, Ebie Vane, who shows a familiarity with the middlebrow even as she wishes to remove herself from it.

The diction of business and cost seems to assume Lily’s active participation in the market in which she circulates. However, despite the narrative’s fluency in this sort of language, Lily is only tossed about as an unwilling consumer and inevitable product. This is seen most clearly in Lily’s reflection on her visit to Selden’s apartment. “Why must a girl pay so dearly for her least escape from routine?” Lily asks (Wharton 36). Rosedale’s discovery of her leaving Selden’s will “cost her rather more than she could afford,” especially since she missed the opportunity to “[purchase] his silence” by putting “money in his pocket” by way of a public appearance (36). Every small social encounter has a price, but Lily is unable to produce enough social capital to sustain herself. “She



was so evidently the victim of the civilization which had produced her, that the links of her bracelet seemed like manacles chaining her to her fate,” Selden reflects (29). Simply put, Lily is chained to society. She must do that which she cannot afford (gambling, ordering fine clothes, etc.) or submit to boredom. “It’s part of the business,” she explains to Selden, but it’s a business that is not particularly lucrative for her (33).

Essentially, Lily is restricted to one path. Selden even remarks that marriage is her “vocation,” because, after all, “Is n’t it what you’re all brought up for?” (Wharton 31). His quip underlines what is a very real problem for Lily. She has no marketable skills, and therefore she *must* succeed on the marriage market. As a beautiful art object, Lily appears to represent a good investment at the beginning of the novel. Beautiful and charming, Selden teases that “there must be plenty of capital on the look-out for such an investment” (Wharton 33). Their witty banter and frank engagement with the innerworkings of high society sets their relationship apart from Lily’s other associations in the novel. She and Selden have a rapport that is established outside of society (very far outside it, in fact—in his private apartment!) and relies on their rejection of social mores.

Lily tries to construct her own world by removing herself from the marriage market, but this is beyond the limits of her creativity. Kaplan discusses realism in “relation to social change, to the representation of class difference, and to the emergence of a mass culture,” and she includes Edith Wharton’s work as one of her primary examples of realism (8). “Realistic narratives enact this search [for reality] not by fleeing into the imagination or into nostalgia for a lost past but by actively constructing the coherent social world they represent” (9). Kaplan argues that the realists “engage in an enormous act of construction to organize, re-form, and control the social world” (10).

While Wharton may do this via her critiques of high society, Lily herself undertakes this construction as she tries to carve out a space for herself in Selden's republic of the spirit. "To present a coherent view of society as a whole, realists draw boundaries and explore their limits," and these boundaries appear particularly rigid in Wharton's novel (Kaplan 11).

Lily has no room for negotiation on the marriage market. Jennifer Haytock claims that Lily "is a free agent on the marriage market" (Haytock 67). This is not entirely true, however. Calling Lily a "free agent" implies that she has some control over her value and circulation, when in fact she has very little "agency" as an object (as opposed to an investor) on the market. In the novel, "marriage functions mainly as a business contract," writes Haytock, in which "women receive social status and financial backing in exchange for their ornamental use in their husband's home and the social power they bring to the marital unit" (136).

Lily's refusal to compromise her ideals for participation in a marriage contract is also a failure to fully participate in her social group. While the capitalistic exchange in the novel clearly rewards the cheaters (those who break the rules of exchange and who are literally unfaithful to their spouses), the "good" Lily must pay and pay and pay. Dimock notes that Lily's "compliance [...] marks her as a deviant," whereas "Bertha Dorset, who avoids paying by making others foot the bill; Mrs. Peniston, who scrimps on her obligations; and Lawrence Selden, who pulls out when the deal seems risky" are all financially and socially secure at the novel's close (787). The less fortunate suffer for their fidelity to exchange. Lily is also ruined by her gross misuse of her assets. Burning Bertha's tawdry letters to Selden is the most obvious example of this misuse, but Lily's

refusal to recognize the monetary value of her own body (or her refusal to submit to Gus Trenor's advances) also suggests a critique of the social mores in their society.

Even though Lily seems willing to remove herself from the constraints of this market with its questionable ethics, she is also unwilling to take a risk with Selden, and he does not wish to make a risky investment with her: "intercourse with Selden might be the last touch of luxury; but in the world as it was, such a privilege was likely to cost more than it was worth" (Wharton 99). Lily weighs the consequences of any unprofitable relationships and finds that associating with Selden will only decrease her value on the marriage market. Lily also concedes that marrying her "would be a great risk" for Selden (Wharton 86).

The risk has some minor reward, however, as Selden's effect on Lily appears to increase her value and her beauty. As Lily considers Selden at the Van Osburgh wedding, Gerty Farish unwittingly makes note of the effect he has on her. Gerty exclaims, "Lily, dear, I never saw you look so lovely! You look as if something delightful had just happened to you!" (99). The dramatic irony is that the reader knows that Lily's mental dismissal of Selden is anything but delightful. More interesting than the slight humor of Gerty's pronouncement is the obvious effect of Selden's presence and attention on Lily. Perhaps a stolen glance across the pew is delightful—at any rate, Lily's increasing beauty (according to Gerty) indicates that Lily's relationship with Selden actually increases her value. This seems rather contradictory, and it may be Lily's inability to perceive the effect Selden has on her that prevents her success in the marketplace. Perhaps her beauty and charm could elevate their social status once married, standing in for the riches (and hosting duties) that would otherwise be expected

from an advantageous match. Also, were Lily to ex-patriate to the republic of the spirit, love and pleasure would be currency enough for the two of them.

Still, Selden needs money for these alternative investments. Though Selden is comfortable, even he admits to certain sacrifices. In his “republic,” gaiety must wait until after work. He is as tied to routine as society women are tied to their calling hours and social engagements. The freedom he feels is slightly marred by his apparent inability to travel to Europe with the frequency of the rest of their social set, and Lily is quick to note that his coat is “a little shabby” (Wharton 33). In other words, Selden’s lifestyle and appearance belie the perfection of his republic. His freedom is slightly restricted by a work schedule and limited funds, and he cannot indulge in the kind of outward beauty that he clearly admires in Lily. Furthermore, though Selden’s coat may be shabby, a woman’s dress in their social circle must be nothing less than impeccable. Lily explains: “We are expected to be pretty and well-dressed till we drop—and if we can’t keep it up alone, we have to go into partnership,” i.e. marriage (33). Later on, she expounds on the cost of associating with the rich to Gerty Farish: “there’s tax to pay on every one of those luxuries” that otherwise would appear free. “The girl pays it by tips and cards too,” she explains, “and by going to the best dress-makers, and having just the right dress for every occasion, and always keeping herself fresh and exquisite and amusing” (Wharton 251). It is important to notice the emphasis Lily places on clothing here. Her clothing, as mentioned earlier, is an essential part of her self-construction and her framing of herself. Her frustrated litany of the requirements of circulation among the upper class hits Gerty unexpectedly, for its delivery appears to change Lily’s face from vibrant to dull. Peel argues that “It is clear that Lily’s decline is caused by the need for money in the absence

of marriage, and that men are everywhere the gatekeepers,” and it would appear that her inability to successfully exist outside of the marketplace is due to her gender (62). Lily’s lack of success on the marriage market also marks her failure as an artist, for without the means to sustain herself, she’s worthless—as any kind of commodity, be it wife or art object.

While the end of the novel is certainly not a happy one, Lily has managed to escape the restrictions of the marriage market and the upper class. As Lily tells Selden, ““It was too late for happiness—but not too late to be helped by the thought of what I had missed”” (Wharton 287). What Lily wants to express to Selden in their final meeting is obscured by the free flow of emotions, usually kept in check with “word-play and evasion” (285). Lily wants “to make him understand that she had saved herself whole from the seeming ruin of her life” (286). Despite poverty and eventual death, Lily has achieved something: she may be an object, but she is still an object of her own creation. Her suicide has allowed her to retain ownership of her own representation, at least. Robinson argues that once Lily descends the social ladder, her body finally becomes “the subject, rather than the object of the labor process,” but I argue that Lily has always been both (357). Orlando argues that Lily turns her body into art and finds power in doing so, but Lily’s conscience balks at the way in which she must prostitute herself: “Lily Bart prostitutes her body when she transforms herself into a work of art: she displays her beauty on the marriage market in hopes of procuring a husband” (57). Though Orlando claims that Lily’s “conscience interferes” (56) with making a successful marriage match, I argue that it is Lily’s love of beauty and deeply-held standards that prevent her from being successful on the marriage market. What interests me is the way in which Wharton

shows that to be marketed as a marriageable woman is to be a commodity, so that every marriageable woman in this social set is a prostitute—women’s bodies are always on display, always available for male consumption at the right price (a wedding band and assurances for the future). What sets Lily apart is that she is adept at marketing and displaying herself, more so than others and with a particular flair.

It is this flair, this artistic sensibility, that spells Lily’s downfall. Lily’s desire for a beautiful space to call her own and freedom from the restrictive marriage market in which she circulates proves unmarketable and untenable. Orlando writes that “Wharton’s women can be circulated as works of art or they can beat men in their own game and elect to circulate themselves” (28). Lily circulates herself, but does so halfheartedly. Lily Bart shows us that the lucrative choice is not always the fulfilling choice, a theme that will echo for women, both fictional and real, for years to come.

### CHAPTER 3

#### “THE MIRACLE OF AMERICA COME TRUE!”: SENTIMENTAL ATTACHMENTS IN ANZIA YEZIERSKA’S *HUNGRY HEARTS* AND *BREAD GIVERS*

Anzia Yeziarska often found herself isolated from others, and she promoted a narrative of herself as a purely independent success. The picture of the individualistic, self-actualized artist was an important myth for her. At the height of Yeziarska’s popularity in the 1920s, she was “the apotheosis of the American dream,” the “Sweatshop Cinderella” who was lifted to the heights of Hollywood from the Lower East Side slums (Zierler 414). Though her books had fallen out of print and she was largely unknown at the time of her death in 1970, Yeziarska’s work has enjoyed a bit of a comeback since her work was re-discovered by Alice Kessler-Harris in 1975.

Anzia Yeziarska’s *Hungry Hearts* (a collection of short stories) and *Bread Givers* (a highly autobiographical novel) are concerned with young women struggling to assert themselves and achieve coherent identities in intellectual, artistic, ethnic, and domestic communities. Each woman’s path is different, but the goal is always the same: to become a fully realized “person.” In Anzia Yeziarska’s fiction, the *künstlerroman* is made uniquely fragile. In these two texts, Yeziarska revises the *künstlerroman* by making artistic development communal and dependent on emotional intimacy. Her heroines’ attachments to art and community create a vision of the American dream that includes wealth and belonging—success that is both material and immaterial. Furthermore, Yeziarska identifies the labor of self-making as an artistic process, positing

that the creation of the individual as an artist is itself a work of art. Yeziarska's stories about the Eastern European Jewish immigrant experience suggest a tension between modernity and the domestic sphere, and thus a tension between the various iterations of the New Woman and nineteenth century ideals of "true" womanhood.

Anzia Yeziarska is recognized as a foremother of the Jewish-American literary tradition, and her work has been valued for the foundation it provides for learning about the immigrant experience (Zierler, Moon, Boyle).<sup>1</sup> Yeziarska's sentimental work calls to mind the domestic fiction of the mid-nineteenth century, but her characters' desires for success outside of the domestic sphere are markedly modern, leading critics to classify her writing differently; some deem her modernist, others sentimental, and occasionally she is called an "ethnic modernist." The tension between these modes provides us with a different way of looking at Yeziarska's success stories. It is in their relationships that Yeziarska's immigrant women find America—after a declaration of love from a suitor or a friendly encounter with a mentor, her heroines proclaim that they have witnessed "the miracle of America come true!" (*HH* 141). A desire "to be somebody" in America is shared by the protagonists across all of Yeziarska's work, and love and beauty appear to be the keys to achieving status as a "person who'll yet ring!," a phrase repeated in the early stories of *Hungry Hearts* (64). Yeziarska's immigrant women specifically locate the realization of the American dream in their friendships, courtships, and artistic endeavors. The "miracle of America" is "realized at last" in simple moments marked by

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<sup>1</sup> Yeziarska's current treatment in scholarship relies on her ethnic identity while neglecting to place her in a larger conversation with other modernists. For example, critic Delia Caparoso Konzett identifies Yeziarska as a member of the "ethnic avant-garde." A writer of the ethnic avant-garde "seeks to change the perception of ethnic minorities as largely passive, victimized, and ghettoized groups, while not denying the traumatic experiences of oppression" (Konzett 8). "Ethnic" writers, then, are treated as representatives of the immigrant experience, making conversations about form secondary.



emotional connection—a kiss, a friendly chat, or a realization of ethnic identity and unity. Her protagonists’ quests for beauty and emotional connection represent an attempt to reconcile a masculinized American dream or artistic development narrative with recognizable feminine codes that govern modes of belonging in public and domestic spheres. A closer look at her work will show that the explicit naming of “the dream of America” throughout both *Hungry Hearts* and *Bread Givers* attributes progress, as both an American and as an artist, to sentimental attachments.

Yeziarska uses conventions of sentimentalism to connect with her readers, but her protagonists also seek a connection with others—specifically, with America at large. Each of her protagonists must first seek a human connection in order to inspire their work. A sense of belonging, whether on a local or national level, is absolutely necessary for further advancement. Glenn Hendler suggests that the bildungsroman, another type of developmental narrative, is fundamentally different with a female lead. Hendler identifies sentimental novels as female bildungsromane that “set up their characters’ quests for sympathy as a search for identity” (123). These female characters “are often willing to violate what appears to be the primary norm of domestic ideology” if it means achieving sympathy (123). In sentimentalist texts, sympathy and maturation are synonymous, suggesting that community supersedes the individual in the woman artist’s quest for achievement.

Sentimentalism, according to Hendler, “is always oriented toward the public” (36). Furthermore, sentimentalism is uniquely capable of reaching a diverse public. Shirley Samuels defines sentimentalism in a particularly active way, calling it “a set of actions within discursive models of affect and identification that effect connections

across gender, race, and class boundaries” (6). As a literary mode, sentimentalism excites passions and evokes strong emotional responses in a broad readership. Yeziarska’s alliance with sentimentalism reflects not only the importance of reaching her readers but also the importance of community for her characters. Aspiring to find and join a community is important for not only her own success as an author but her characters’ success as artists. The overwrought emotional displays (featuring crying, shouting, and an abundance of exclamation points), the invocations of a higher power (occasionally God, but more often a mysterious and evocative idea of America), and the sympathetic appeals of the young female characters to those around them are all indications of sentimentalism at work. The explicit invocation of the American dream throughout *Bread Givers* and *Hungry Hearts* is a call that links Yeziarska’s heroines to each other and to a larger community.

The most notable formal attribute of Yeziarska’s prose is its likeness to conversational, broken English. Yeziarska and her reviewers often made note of her “Immigrant English” as a unique trait of her writing that made her stories seem charmingly authentic. Her biographers indicate, however, that “Immigrant English” was not a natural or easy language for her. Rather, there are stories of Yeziarska fretting over drafts with her sister, making multiple attempts at conveying imperfect English perfectly. Her studied approach at writing in a style presumed to be organic to her conveys the importance of style and form for Yeziarska.

When Yeziarska’s form is discussed, the focus is usually on her use of this “Immigrant English.” Delia Caparoso Konzett argues that Yeziarska’s finely tuned “Immigrant English” is a formal manifestation of linguistic and cultural hybridity in her

writing. Yeziarska's language, Konzett claims, "not only resists and critically reflects upon the exclusive claims of both English and Yiddish but also envisions a new, radically democratic America" (30). Brooks Hefner terms Yeziarska a "vernacular modernist," meaning that her work is descended from popular literature and culture (189). Hefner brands Yeziarska with this term because her prose is formally innovative and playful yet rooted in the popular. Vernacular modernism celebrates the hybrid nature of Yeziarska's writing, which "resulted in a new mode of thinking about language and representation" (Hefner 189). Her playfulness and "mixing" of modes is one method of fostering identification with a large, diverse readership (Harker 20).

What Werner Sollors terms "ethnic prose" proliferated and joined the mainstream between 1910-1950 (39). These authors both denied and affirmed ethnic stereotypes in order to reach a wide audience and create stories with a more universal message (44-45). In these usually very autobiographical stories of assimilation, "education tends to be central" and "difficult negotiations between the world of work and the realm of artistic creation are common" (Sollors 59). Of writers like Yeziarska, Sollors writes that "their marginal location in a world of modernity may have pushed some writers who were immigrants and migrants toward modernism," suggesting that an unfamiliarity with American custom and modern industry together was the impetus for formal innovation.

Yiddish exclamations are peppered throughout her writing, and occasional Yiddish words and phrases are only rarely glossed in the text. The effect on an uninformed reader is temporary dislocation—a distancing that reminds average American readers that their America or New York City is not the same as Yeziarska's, while it is simultaneously very near. Sollors argues that "such cases of a defamiliarization of the

English language seem to straddle a borderline between naturalistic verisimilitude and modernist prose” (63). This uncomfortable alienation from the familiar also serves to make the reader the immigrant, the newcomer to a strange but exhilarating textual encounter. Her work assumes, however, that the sound and appearance of these Yiddish words and phrases, so carefully chosen, convey meaning in a way that a mere definition could not. Yeziarska attempts to reach out to a community via these choices, whether that community is constituted as her readership or as a larger conversation about immigrant lives and what it means to be American.

Yeziarska’s writing often incorporates traditional modes of storytelling, described by Alice Kessler-Harris as folktale formulas. The first half *Bread Givers* consists of a series of similar tales about Sara’s sisters and their suitors. These stories are repetitive and do not take place in any particular time frame or season. This formula, and the fact that it is repeated for multiple characters as if to impart a lesson, is endemic to folktale tradition. This repetitive structure is at odds with the realism of Yeziarska’s tenement descriptions, however. *Bread Givers* paints a stark picture of life in the Lower East Side, and this realistic imagery seems incongruous with the repetitive plots. Yeziarska’s formulaic plots are a surprising companion to this realistic depiction of city life. Her *künstlerromane* allow these two modes to intersect in a manner that highlights a tension between public/private, community/individual, and arts/Art.

Yeziarska’s heroines struggle with their place within cultural tradition as they attempt to release themselves from the past. Their relations to loss are conflicted, however. This loss for what will never be is deeply felt, as Yeziarska shows through the sometimes unsatisfying and often ambiguous conclusions of her stories. Sara Smolinsky,

for example, seems eager to throw off all connection to the Old World, including her oppressive patriarch. However, her story circles back to him, even as her career moves her farther away. Yeziarska's heroines internalize the loss of the Old World and the loss of the New that they will never fully see or inhabit. By virtue of being Jewish, relatively new to the U.S., poor, and female, Yeziarska's characters are limited in what they can do and achieve. Therefore, their feelings of loss are not relegated to the past but include the present and the future. The promise of modernity is occluded for them—all their desiring and striving will only take them so far.

Modernism values the individual artist, whose potential is marked by his self-conception. Modernist novels about the development of the artist laud the singular genius—Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, for example, in which family or community is merely something to be endured before breaking off entirely to realize one's artistic potential. Alienated from others, he “springs from the Platonic conception of himself” à la Gatsby. In order to achieve success as an individual in the modern and as a serious artist, he must forsake all others, cut all ties. Most importantly, he is free from the messiness of the mundane and the domestic. In contrast, Yeziarska's work continually draws our attention back to community. Households, the society of other women, romances, friendships, neighborhoods, tenements, and intellectual alliances are the focal points of Yeziarska's work in spite of her narratives of individual artistic achievement. Alienation is not a prerequisite for women's artistic achievement in Yeziarska's work the way it is in classic examples of the *künstlerroman*. In the woman's *künstlerroman*, as demonstrated by Yeziarska, while independence is still key to artistic achievement, it is not what creates the artist. Yeziarska's work suggests that

communities are a necessary step on that journey of artistic advancement. These texts propose that love, friendship, and belonging are integral in transforming the woman into an artist.

Yeziarska's fictional women wish for attachments that will allow them to be recognized as part of national, ethnic, or artistic communities—these could also be termed “counterpublics” or “intimate publics.”<sup>2</sup> Yeziarska's women all rely on or long for a community to call their own. These communities serve multiple purposes. They show us a construction of American identity and how immigrants can assimilate or resist it, they emphasize the importance of a shared language in forging connections, and they shape the woman into the artist. The different iterations of community that Yeziarska's fiction presents all emphasize the necessity for a commonality or universality among immigrants and among women. Lauren Berlant suggests a definition of “women's culture” as “distinguished by a view that the people marked by femininity already have something in common and are in need of a conversation that feels intimate [and] revelatory” (ix). These female protagonists may allow for an empathetic reader to make a meaningful connection to them, but they also reach for participation in their own publics within the texts. Berlant suggests that “public-sphere femininity” provides “a sentimental account of the social world as an affective space where people ought to be legitimated because they have feelings and because there is an intelligence in what they feel that knows something about the world” (2).

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<sup>2</sup> Michael Warner defines a counterpublic as a space in “tension with a larger public” and one “which enables a horizon of opinion and exchange; its exchanges remain distinct from authority and can have a critical relation to power; its extent is in principle indefinite, because it is not based on a precise demography but mediated by print, theater, diffuse networks of talk, commerce, and the like” (Warner 56).

This version of the social world helps us better understand the intensity of feeling and aspirations for belonging in Yeziarska's stories. For Yeziarska's heroines, lovers, families, or friends can count as "community." After all, these small interactions engender a sense of belonging to a larger community, such as an ethnic group, a neighborhood, a scholarly conversation, or even a nation.<sup>3</sup> Michael Warner explains how a public becomes a social entity and operates to link others: "Publics are essentially intertextual, frameworks for understanding texts against an organized background of the circulation of other texts, all interwoven not just by citational references but by the incorporation of a reflexive circulatory field in the mode of address and consumption" (16). The communities in Yeziarska's fiction operate as counterpublics. Opposed to the larger social structures that seek to aid or oppress them, these groups and relationships offer advancement, friendship, and inspiration. They are not formal institutions, but they are created and sustained by mutual feeling—affection, stimulating conversation, etc. Middlebrow fiction like Yeziarska's immigrant narratives played an active role in circulating ideas among a counterpublic of women readers. Jaime Harker names middlebrow novels as "women's activist fiction," arguing that these popular works served a political purpose, motivating their readers to take action or at least take a new

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<sup>3</sup> Kevin Piper offers a reading of *Bread Givers* that emphasizes the way in which a national community can work in concert with otherness. Piper reads *Bread Givers* as a counternarrative, which he defines as a narrative that is "representative of the whole country" though "told from the perspective of a country's minorities" (99). He suggests that reading the novel as a counternarrative allows for Yeziarska to both critique and identify with an American national identity. He states: "*Bread Givers* contains a subtle counternarrative depicting an identification with America that occurs through, not despite, the Jewish Polish values of its immigrant author" (99). Difference and cohesion appear possible via what he terms the "counternarrative." Though some critics find *Bread Givers* to be highly critical of assimilation, Piper argues that the novel "removes the need to treat ethnic self-expression as a rejection of American national identity" (109). The very genre of the counternarrative allows for Yeziarska to both resist the pressures of assimilation while carving out a place for herself and her protagonists in America. *Bread Givers*, and potentially other counternarratives, can function as a bildungsroman with a difference. In order to succeed, the immigrant does not conform. Rather, the immigrant's experience fosters and perhaps even requires her resistance.

view (3). Of the authors of this activist fiction, Harker claims that they “all worked from older models of authorship and eschewed dramatic formal experimentation” (3).

Labeling the middlebrow as political domestic fiction forces us to view Yeziarska’s work in a more active role—though celebrated as a sort of window into the Jewish American experience, her work can be read as much more than social history. Harker writes that progressive commitments were possible thanks to the intimate connection forged between middlebrow writers and their audience—an idea aligned with Dewey’s aesthetic theory, in which “emotion [...] binds writer and reader and creates the aesthetic experience” (11). In other words, art creates community. In Yeziarska’s fiction, it is the community that creates art.

Yeziarska’s desire for belonging in the literary market and in America is marked by her engagement with ethnic and intellectual communities via her characters. In *Intimacy in America*, critic Peter Coviello suggests that recognition of the national within the local and personal is an essential part of how American identity has always been shaped: “The notion of a nation given shape by the specifically affective ties binding its anonymous citizens has been less a historical peculiarity than an elemental form of American self-narration” (169). In other words, American cultural identity has always been structured by sentimental attachments. When Yeziarska’s heroines find America in moments of intimate connection, they are engaging in a typical and traditional narrative of nation.

Whether Yeziarska’s heroines achieve artistic, economic, or personal success largely depends on their cultural and linguistic fluency. Brooks Hefner highlights her characters’ varying degrees of fluency, finding that even those that know conventional



English are not bound by it, and “Immigrant English” is again and again associated with authenticity. Hefner claims that this meticulous application of dialect hints at a larger theme in Yeziarska’s stories: “the fear that the adoption of bourgeois American culture and realist language might not enable the narrative of success or an emotionally and aesthetically challenging fiction” (201). By retaining her “immigrant English,” Yeziarska shows that being true to oneself and resisting assimilation is key to artistic achievement.

Yeziarska provides a different model of artistic development and achievement, in which self-making is a form of art itself. Her characters desire recognition as individuals first, and the labor of acquiring such recognition is a part of the artistic process. Additionally, her *künstlerromane* require meaningful connection to others in order for the artist to progress. Hendler identifies sentimental novels as female *bildungsromane* that “set up their characters’ quests for sympathy as search for identity” (123). These female characters “are often willing to violate what appears to be the primary norm of domestic ideology” if it means achieving sympathy, which here is synonymous with maturation (123). Communities and the connections they provide are thus a necessary component of the artist’s development.

Yeziarska associates art and feeling with interpersonal connections. Communities and intimate relationships are capable of transforming the artist and her art. Emotional connection for or with others is what enables development, creating a potential artist. This is important for two reasons: First, it makes the domestic sphere that women have historically been relegated to useful even in a public context. Second, it provides a transition from private to public that makes it clear that there has always been a public in the private (or, in Warner’s terminology, a counterpublic).

Published in 1925 at the height of Yeziarska's fame, *Bread Givers* is the coming-of-age narrative of Sara Smolinsky, the fourth and youngest daughter of Jewish immigrants from Russian Poland. Each of Sara's older sisters falls in love, comes close to marriage, and then has her plans thwarted by their father. The climax and denouement of each sister's story is the same: the lover is turned away and a new prospect is chosen by Reb Smolinsky, a grim Talmudic scholar who refuses to seek gainful employment or clutter his mind with mundane concerns. Sara's story does not follow this formula, however, and she strikes off on her own after confronting her father with following shocking declaration: "'I have to live and die by what's in me [...] Preaching don't change me. Why don't you let me alone'" (*BG* 207). In what appears to be a fairly standard immigrant assimilation story, Sara works hard, gets an education, and becomes a teacher in her old Lower East Side neighborhood.

*Bread Givers* is a very autobiographical novel. According to the biography written by her daughter Louise Levitas Henriksen, Yeziarska based most of the characters on real people. Bessie, Fania, and Mashah are prototypes of Yeziarska's sisters Bessie, Fannie, and Annie, respectively. Sara, the protagonist, stands in for the author herself. Indeed, the novel was so closely modeled on Yeziarska's youth, its exaggerations became conflated with the truth even in her own mind. Writes Henriksen, "she often could not remember what was real and what invented in this or, for that matter, her other stories and books," because Yeziarska was so deeply "affected by the force of her own creation" (217). This is true of her characters as well, who find themselves overwhelmed by beauty, affection, and learning.

Yeziarska's use of Yiddish in *Bread Givers* serves to both draw in and alienate readers. Reb Smolinsky frequently uses the phrase "Blut und Eisen!" when frustrated with his daughter Sara. This expletive appears many times before a brief explanation is given. The phrase's frequent recurrence at moments of exasperation and anger and its oft-accompanying exclamation point put a force behind those consonant endings and the "un" syllables, making the "u" sounds nearly bellow. The reader can then easily infer the meaning of the phrase through attention to the look and sound of it, attesting to the meaning-making capabilities of form. Yeziarska meshes the Old World with the New here—Yiddish separates Sara from her goal of becoming an "Americaner" teacher, but later she loves being able to share Yiddish with her Hugo Seelig, her love interest. In other words, "Immigrant English," so often discussed by critics for its inventiveness, makes and breaks connections in the artist heroine's journey.

While Yeziarska urges her readers to find significance in her "Immigrant English," she also shows her characters finding meaning in a variety of unexpected places. In spite of a childhood of domestic drudgery and a young adulthood spent slaving away at college and at a laundry, Sara finds beauty and grandeur all around her. When her mother entreats Sara to visit her in New Jersey, Sara demurs and explains that she must study instead. "It's because I'm young that my minutes are like diamonds to me," she tells her pitiful mother (*BG* 172). Though it is clear that Sara values her education more than her family, the glimmer she places on that educational experience makes her preference inarguable. By claiming that her "minutes are like diamonds," Sara accomplishes two things. First, Sara sees beauty and wealth where her family does not. This predisposition to see beauty and joy where there should be none is a trait that many

of Yeziarska's protagonists share. Second, Sara's minutes are doubly valuable to her—they represent her freedom but also her future earning potential.

Sara's mother no doubt understands the worth of diamonds, which have already featured once in the novel. Reb Smolinsky is eager to marry Mashah to a diamond dealer, envisioning his son-in-law's immense wealth in his own pockets (though Mashah's match, like the other girls' suitors, is not what he seems—he turns out to be a lowly clerk in a jewelry shop). Sara makes it clear to her mother in this conversation that her time and her schooling are every bit as valuable and potentially lucrative as diamonds, and in fact she holds more potential with her metaphorical diamonds than Mashah's deceptive husband ever did. This small simile is a powerful statement about Sara's promise and worth as a person.

Sara carefully deploys this diamond metaphor to persuade her mother of the importance of her time away from home, but all of the Smolinsky women are inclined to see beauty in the everyday. Though Mashah is the most obvious example, as she spends her time adding minor flourishes to her hat and gazing at herself in the mirror instead of looking for work, Sara's mother also finds beauty and emotional connection in simple things. Mother is unimpressed by the things one can buy, as they are "made by machines." "Even Rockefeller's daughter got only store-bought, ready-made things," she argues, whereas "there was a feeling" in her hand-crocheted tablecloth (*BG* 33). Mother astutely recognizes the alienation resulting from modernity. There can be no warmth, love, or specialness in a product made by a cold and unfeeling machine. Mother imbued that tablecloth with her own spirit, elevating it from product to art object. Sara attempts to do the same with her dedication to her education.

In addition to putting love into their work, these women must negotiate being both artist and art object. Mashah, Sara's sister, serves as an example of fettered beauty—an artist trapped as art object. Though the apartment Mashah shares with her husband is small and dark, Sara discovers that Mashah's eye for beauty and good taste have made it comfortable. A little splash of paint here and there and a knack for hiding the unsightly successfully counteracts the ugliness of the place. "White curtains of the cheapest cheesecloth were on the one window, but hung with that grace that Mashah put into anything she touched" (*BG* 146). Mashah's artistry is second nature to her, as it is to their mother. Just as their mother has the ability to convey love through a tablecloth, Mashah can transform a dingy space into a welcoming home. However, imbuing her home with light and beauty has cost Mashah dearly. Notes Sara, "Beauty was in that house. But it had come out of Mashah's face. The sunny colour of her walls had taken the colour out of her cheeks. The shine of her pots and pans had taken the lustre out of her hair. And the soda with which she had scrubbed the floor so clean, and laundered her rags so white, had burned in and eaten the beauty out of her hands" (*BG* 147). This striking passage shows the creative and affective toil of Mashah's housekeeping. Beauty comes at a great cost. In Mashah's case, she has sacrificed herself and her loveliness for home. The result is that she is not a person: her husband calls her both "a worn-out rag" and "a horse" (*BG* 150). The dream of becoming a person and an artist is curtailed when the distinction between artist and art object blurs. Instead of being invigorated by art, Mashah is completely drained by it. Mashah differs from other Yezierska "makers" in her isolation. Both community and creativity are necessary for becoming a person, and

Mashah shows that without friendly supports, she is effectively depleted of both her beauty and her personhood.

Establishing personhood is an important part of achieving success in *Bread Givers*. Yeziarska's heroines follow an unusual trajectory—rather than marrying up the social ladder or working for equity within a marriage, these female characters seek to improve their lots on their own terms, whether that means going to college or simply moving out from under the thumb of an oppressive patriarch. Literary critic Peter Brooks suggests that so-called female plots generally have an ambiguous relationship to ambition, and are driven more by a desire for selfhood (39). This desire for selfhood is apparent throughout Yeziarska's work, as each heroine wishes to be recognized as a “person.” Sara in particular remains ambivalent about what it means to become a “person” and seems unsure about the sacrifices that transformation requires.

A fully realized “person” is a rather narrow category in Sara's eyes. A person is not necessarily a man or woman, though her father often implies that only a man can be a person. For Sara, however, a person is anyone capable of earning money and attaining a modicum of independence. Young Sara decides to peddle unwanted herring in order to help her mother pay the rent, but when offered damaged herring for free by a sympathetic neighborhood, Sara refuses: ““No—no! I'm no beggar! I want to go into business like a person”” (BG 21). Her insistent repetition of “no” at the offer of assistance is in stark contrast to her desperate pleas for help and understanding as a student later in the novel. Even as a child, Sara recognizes that financial prowess and self-making are key for identification as person. Sara believes she can attain personhood through education and financial independence, while her parents believe only men can achieve this status.

Sara's mother laments, 'I'd be happier to see you get married. What's a school teacher?'" (*BG* 172). Tellingly, she asks "what" and not "who." Though Mother's "immigrant English" is partially responsible for this word choice, it also reveals the attitude against which Sara must prove herself. In Sara's thinking, she must finish her journey of development prior to marriage. She explains to Mother that "'to marry myself to a man that's a person, I must first make myself a person'" (*BG* 172). Though she eventually lives on her own while working and going to night school, Sara continues to express a desire to be like a person. It is not until the final section of the novel that Sara finally refers to herself as a person, and this moment coincides with her return to the city after college.

Paradoxically, the path to Sara's personhood is her independence from her oppressive family, but the absence of familial love makes her less of a person. Realizing that her oatmeal is made "hateful" because she has no one to share it with, Sara reflects that "even in our worst poverty we sat around the table, together, like people" (*BG* 173). The trouble with independence is that Sara must leave her family, knowing that her loneliness is a temporary setback in her quest for recognition as a self-actualized person. This moment contradicts Sara's initial feelings on being free from her parents. Being alone first exhilarated her and in fact placed her in a much larger community: "The strength of a million people was surging up in me. [...] I wanted to dance, to fly in the air and kiss the sun and stars with my singing heart. I, alone with myself, was enjoying myself for the first time as with grandest company" (*BG* 157). Sara realizes the tension between solitude and community that will continue to mark her life as a scholar. Sara desperately wants a "door to shut," yet she is ecstatic when her sisters and mother pay her

a visit and allow her a brief respite from her studies. These competing desires are evident in the novel's complicated romance plots, since attraction to a potential partner would seem to be at odds with the single-minded ambition to be a "person."

Despite a focus on sentimental attachments, Yeziarska's treatment of the American dream does not allow immigrant women to marry working-class men. Love plots should be impossible in this narrative, yet they are present throughout. Sara sees the miserable lives of her sisters Bessie and Mashah, who have been married off to poor men in the ghetto, and she refuses to let her father choose her mate. When Sara meets and falls in love with Hugo, he is not only of a higher standing than her sisters' husbands, but as principal of the school, he is her immediate supervisor. According to Christie Launius, this marks an important distinction for the female American dream narrative. "Desire for education and class mobility is incompatible with romance and marriage to a working-class man," she notes (127). Trying to navigate this incompatibility can be difficult, however, and the result is Sara's "conflation of her desire for love and knowledge" (133).

Though Sara Smolinksy seems to achieve her dream by graduating from college and becoming a teacher, her journey is not complete until she meets her lover, Hugo. Hugo is from the same region of Poland, and upon discovering this connection, they exclaim "*Landsleute*—countrymen!" in unison and clasp hands in a moment of ecstatic joy (BG 277). In this scene, their shared language is a proclamation of their attachment to one another. The realization of their love for each other can be partially attributed to their shared heritage, but it is also yet another example of how assimilation may have prevented their narratives of success. Furthermore, this relationship shows how romance



in Yeziarska's fiction is less about the couple and more centered on the broader connection made possible through these relationships. Sara's relationship with Hugo represents not only a connection to a Polish community but also affirms Sara's commitment to the educational community to which she is already engaged.

It is true that Sara does find herself attracted to scholarly types: her first crush is the neighborhood's resident starving poet, and her college experience is slightly marred by her unreturned affections for a young professor. Throughout the novel, Sara is shown to value emotional attachments and knowledge equally. After an unpleasant break-up with Max Goldstein, a suitor who dismisses her academic goals, Sara gratefully substitutes books for his company. "I seized my books and hugged them to my breast as though they were living things," she claims, indicating that her books provide that which Max could not: a path forward and an alignment with her goals (201). If Sara is guilty of loving Hugo for his affiliation with education, she is also prone to love her books as passionately as she might love a man, suggesting that the experience provided by these attachments (to both/either men and/or books) is more significant than the attachments themselves. In what might be a moment tinged with regret or sadness at Max's departure, Sara decides that "nothing was so beautiful as to learn" (*BG* 201).

Ecstatic triumph seems reserved for moments of academic, not romantic, success. The first chapter of the final book of the novel shouts: "Home! Back to New York! Sara Smolinsky, from Hester Street, changed into a person!" (*BG* 237). The series of exclamation points here serves to herald her arrival and celebrate her newly achieved personhood. She has been "changed into a person" by her college education. Though financial security is of course important (the next scene takes Sara on a shopping trip for

a new dress and accessories), as Sara has changed into a person, so has her definition of personhood. Though Sara has always defined personhood as the result of hard work and self-sufficiency, it is specifically her college experience and the joy of hearing her name chanted at commencement that has made her a person in her own mind. Recognition by others and engagement in an intellectual community are Sara's requirements for being a person. This emphasis on attaining the right kind of connections in order to be a productive person continues throughout the stories of *Hungry Hearts*, in which lovers and families almost inevitably disappoint.

Meaningful connections do not have to be lasting, however. Even the experience of a failed relationship has productive capacities. In "Wings," Shenah Pessah desires a romantic relationship but ends up instead with knowledge and boosted self-esteem. Her story opens *Hungry Hearts* and sets the tone for the collection. Shenah strives for light and love, aching for the smallest ray of sunshine to enter her basement room while she witnesses the community forming on the street outside her dirty window. Almost magically, the sun finally penetrates her room at the precise moment that a strange young man enters looking for the landlady. His name is John Barnes, and he is a professor studying Russian immigrants like Shenah.

Shenah, like many of Yeziarska's characters, finds herself overcome with emotion fairly often. Heavenly and hyperbolic language is used throughout the story to describe Shenah and her feelings toward John Barnes. Her emotions overtake her and lift her up, not just from the basement but as far as the sky. John makes the assumption that this "nebulous emotionalism," a "pendulum swinging from abject servility to boldest aggressiveness," is a feature of all Russian Jews (*HH* 8, 10). Shenah's intensity is

juxtaposed with John's disaffection—he is confused and displeased with Shenah's displays of feeling, most notably her excessive exclamations and her eagerness to learn. Overjoyed at the prospect of learning English, Shenah hurriedly clasps his hand as if to ensure he will not “disappear in the heavens where he belonged” (9). In her excitement, Shenah associates John and the world he represents with the heavens. But while John is sunlight and air to Shenah, she is merely an object of study to him. Indeed, the imbalance between John and Shenah is also what attracts her to him. Throughout the story, she associates him with the heavens. After their first meeting, Shenah finds herself elevated, “whirling in space, millions of miles above the earth” (10). She is uplifted and perhaps improved by her association with him, yet she is also spinning out of control and away from others. There is no uncertainty or fear couched in Shenah's otherworldly language, however, and the reader's only clue that things will end badly is John's utter absence of like language. Whereas he brings in sunlight for Shenah, she does not seem to provide similar inspiration for him.

The opposition of light and dark is common in Yeziarska's prose, and “Wings” is no exception. Shenah compares the light John provides with the impossibly dark depths of her life prior to his entrance: “The blacker, the more stifling the ugliness of her prison, the more luminous became the light of the miraculous stranger” (*HH* 16). She continues marveling at the contrast, finding that “It was as though inside a pit of darkness the heavens opened and hopes began to sing” (*HH* 16). So ecstatic is Shenah at the mere presence of another person who may be slightly interested in her, she immediately resorts to melodramatic imagery. Choirs of angels sing when John enters, even though she does not know him yet. This miraculous moment of the heavens opening and light permeating

Shenah's life is not caused by John per se, but by mere connection and interest. He represents a change from the routine of her daily "prison," and thus represents freedom and opportunity.

While any dark tenement could be described as a prison, in Shenah's case it's a particularly apt metaphor. Shenah is removed from others—she toils away for her uncle and lives in a metaphorical dungeon of a basement. Kept cloistered, Shenah is as far away from the heavens and from human contact as possible in an overcrowded tenement. Most telling is the conversation between Mrs. Melker, the match-maker, and Shenah's uncle that takes place immediately after her first meeting with John. Though they are discussing Shenah's prospects with a fish merchant, Shenah herself is left out of the dialogue. Their conversation about her potential marriage lasts three pages without any direct address to her, though she is apparently in the room. Even when Shenah is central to a conversation, she is removed from it. It should be unsurprising, then, that a brief encounter with an interested party should elevate her to such heights.

Intimacy with John provides a conduit to the American opportunity that Shenah has hoped for. The climax of the story occurs when Shenah and John kiss on a moonlit pier. As he takes her hand to walk with her down the pier, Shenah has a moment of realization: "'Now see I America for the first time!'" she exclaims (28). The choice of setting here is key—neither the dark, grimy tenement nor the well-lit interior of the library they previously visited allows an intimate moment between the immigrant girl and the young professor, but the compromise of moonlight strikes a balance that allows their improbable kiss to happen. In fact, light changes her understanding of their relationship entirely. In the public library for the first time, Shenah reflects that "her first contact with

him in a well-lighted room made her aware that ‘there were other things to the person besides the dress-up’” (27).

The class connotations of the well-lit library and the quiet librarians in their subdued dress serve as a stark contrast to Shenah’s dim room and her garish new dress and hat. Though she has yearned for light (both from John’s eyes and from the sun streaming through her window), now she finds it uncomfortable, confiding to John after their library visit, “the electric lights are like so many eyes looking you over,” whereas in the street, “the dark covers you up so good” (28). Shenah’s discomfort stems from the startling experience of entering into another culture. Ann Mikkelsen argues that Shenah’s attempt at dressing to impress John Barnes indicates “a transition across cultures that also entails a mutual transformation of those cultures (371). The resulting hybrid culture also transforms Shenah. “Undermining traditional subject-object relations, *Shenah is her own object*” (Mikkelsen 371, emphasis mine). Self-creation as self-objectification means that the artist herself is the art object. The goal for Yeziarska’s heroines is not merely assimilation or material success—rather, they aim for transformation, both of themselves and of their cultural communities. Her protagonists desire not a general sense of belonging, but a hybrid class and cultural identity within multiple communities. Achievement is synonymous with culture clash, again highlighting the implicit hybridity in Shenah’s burgeoning American identity. Many of Yeziarska’s characters are forever-desiring artists; constantly in motion and never quite finished in their artistic development, these immigrant women bring a new vitality to the *künstlerroman*. Their narratives of artistic development are always deliberately unfinished—the driving need for cultural belonging and the transformations it

necessitates make their artistic and intellectual journeys evolve rather than conclude. Mikkelsen claims that “Shenah’s outfit constitutes the outward manifestation of the perpetually desiring subject as her own object” (372). This idea is also evident in Michael North’s reading of *Salome of the Tenements*, where he notes that when Sonya adopts the simple dress of a well-bred woman, she refers to it as her “costume” (North 101). North also remarks on the instability of the concepts of “real” and “nakedness” in the novel, wherein Sonya’s “costume” makes her more “real” and “naked” because it outwardly displays her aspirations (101). The development of the artist as a person is also the development of art itself, since both require authenticity and artifice.

Unlike other sentimental writers, Yeziarska does not promote sympathy as a means of belonging. Warner defines counterpublics as self-created spaces set apart from institutions, and Yeziarska’s heroines find no comfort in public attempts to better them. Though John Barnes and the library represent mechanisms of enculturation for Shenah, she is ultimately uncomfortable with them. This refusal of institutionalized assistance is not uncommon in *Hungry Hearts*. Some of these stories, “The Free Vacation House” in particular, skewer social programs designed to help the poor and focus on the characters’ ambition and individualism. Mikkelsen and Hefner both agree that in Yeziarska’s fiction, immigrant women are not uplifted by outside intervention, and sympathy alone does not generate positive outcomes. Moments of charity “are depicted as far less successful than scenes that celebrate the aesthetic, intellectual, emotional, and physical sensations of self-creation” (Mikkelsen 364). Yeziarska does not value sympathy—indeed, she critiques it. Her portrayals of well-intentioned charity, such as in “The Free Vacation House” and “My Own People,” expose the condescension and cluelessness in efforts to provide aid.

This is clear in “Wings,” as John’s influence affects Shenah only after he leaves, while his actual presence yields only hurt feelings. Yeziarska’s turn away from sympathy is bound up in issues of privilege and representation, and she places value on not only experiential knowledge, but the process of experience itself. Mikkelsen continues: “Rather than reaching out to others, Yeziarska’s heroines are most successful in the moments in which they turn outward as a means of looking at themselves, discovering themselves as aesthetic objects and refocusing their efforts on their self-fashioning” (364).

By looking outward at John, Shenah is able to see her own capabilities. Though John may have shown Shenah America for the first time, she discovers that the light she saw in him was always available to her, so this failed romance still nets a sense of belonging for Shenah. Sitting alone after watching John leave, she notices the light: “Little by little the darkness cleared from her soul and a wistful serenity swept over her. She raised her face toward the solitary ray of sunshine that stole into her basement room” (34). For once, the darkness is not solely attributed to the bleak, grimy room, but to Shenah’s interiority. Perhaps Shenah is learning that the light, which was always within her, means that she is never alone. North proposes that “the private self is already thoroughly public,” and “public” is no longer the neutral ground it once appeared to be, but rather “a web of partially articulated presuppositions, received ideas, beliefs, and prejudices” (North 70). Disappointed by John as her link to American-ness, Shenah nonetheless realizes that she is hooked into something larger than herself. The national community of “America” is not the unbiased and welcoming public Shenah had hoped for, yet in discovering this she also finds that she cannot be the only one left out of it.

A little glimpse of emotional connection, even broken off, has successfully brought light to Shenah and put her in touch with herself and her goals of working her way out of her current situation. It is her momentary heartbreak that shows her that “From now on, you got why to live,” because Shenah marvels to herself that John “opened the wings of your soul” (34). Though her romance with John is through, the experience of that failed connection leads her to self-realization.

A brief flirtation provides Shenah with the motivation to devise a way out of drudgery and her uncle’s exploitation, effectively linking her to a larger national community with others who share similar ambitions. In “Hunger,” the story following “Wings,” Shenah finds that interaction with immigrants like herself can create a feeling of belonging. She is “crazy for people,” in general, not just a lover (*HH* 25). Engagement with a community, whether it be via a man who represents a nation or a factory staffed by other immigrants, is Shenah’s motivation for lifting herself out of the basement.

Hunger for more than just bread is the theme that links all of the stories in *Hungry Hearts*, as the title implies. This hunger, and the hope that satiates it, is directly affiliated with the American dream of success. Shenah Pessah explains to Sam Arkin: “But only—there is a something—a hope—a help out—it lifts me on top of my hungry body—the hunger to make from myself a person that can’t be crushed by nothing nor nobody—the life higher!” (64). This disjointed, impassioned speech serves both to inspire Sam Arkin and cure him of his hurt from being rebuffed by Shenah. Though Shenah’s speech is often punctuated by dashes and exclamation marks, nowhere else is her speech quite so broken up or enthusiastic. These incomplete thoughts set off by dashes create a jerky,



breathless rhythm that is nearly orgasmic. This “hope” somehow lifts her outside of her own body, transforming physical hunger pangs into an all-consuming desire to be a person. The inexplicable exclamation of “the life higher!” is a triumphant pinnacle to her speech that abruptly rockets her out of hunger.

This productive hunger is linked for Shenah to her American experience.

“Hunger” ends thusly:

He saw her eyes fill with light as though she were seeing something far beyond them both. “This,” she breathed, “is only the beginning of the hunger that will make from you a person who’ll yet ring in America” (64).

Similar to the ending of “Wings,” “Hunger” leaves us with a picture of Shenah emanating light, instead of being suffocated by darkness. This optimistic ending is complicated by her reading of hunger, however. Rather than promising Sam that hunger will dissipate with success, Shenah promises even more hunger. She suggests that this version of hunger will provide the driving force that will lead to self-invention. Her clever idiom that closes the story conflates the fully-realized person with a bell, perhaps the Liberty Bell, promising a grand future for all those who hunger. With her speech at the end of “Hunger,” Shenah hopes to comfort Sam while also explaining the transformative experience of meeting John Barnes. In many ways, Shenah is to Sam what John was to her: a fleeting but important contact on the path to self-fulfillment. Community, as broadly defined here, is not a permanent relationship but a sense of belonging necessary for growth and development. These relationships do not represent a conclusion but rather a beginning for these characters. The goal is not to attach to a person simply for the sake of it but to *become* a person.

“To be a person” is of utmost importance to all of Yeziarska’s heroines, not just Sara Smolinsky. In “The Lost Beautifulness,” Hanneh Hayyeh also desires personhood, and she finds it in her creative domestic pursuits. ““When I see myself around the house how I fixed it up with my own hands, I forget I’m only a nobody. It makes me feel I’m also a person,”” she claims (*HH* 69). Like Sara, Hanneh needs to have a direct hand in her own attainment of personhood. Only she can recognize herself as a person, and she does it by looking upon the products of her own work. For Shenah Pessah in “Wings” and “Hunger,” personhood is the result of Americanization and financial stability. In order to feel like a person, she insists on dressing the part, implying that until she is wearing a dress and hat in the current style, she is not a fully realized person. Shenah refuses Sam Arkin’s attempts to woo her by promising to shower her with gifts, crying out ““You can’t make me for a person,”” even while believing that she can make herself into one by working hard to adopt new habits and dress (*HH* 61). “People,” according to Hanneh and Shenah, are fully self-invented products of hard work and conviction.

For Yeziarska’s immigrant women, the creative pursuit of self-making requires more than hard work, however. The unnamed protagonist of “Soap and Water” aspires to go to college to find America for herself, but is instead shunned by what she calls the “clean society” (*HH* 170). Her longing for collegiality is unmet because of her rather disheveled appearance, and she finds herself stuck—her poverty prevents her from buying finer clothes, and her resulting untidiness prevents her from finding a better-paying job. Despite her lack of friends and her fatigue, her “eyes still sought the sky, praying, ceaselessly praying, the dumb, inarticulate prayer of the immigrant; ‘America! Ach, America! Where is America?’” (*HH* 174). Though clearly disillusioned by her

experience with higher education, her prayers indicate a hope that the promise of American opportunity will still present itself. The numbing repetition of this passage makes her desperation palpable, and her own acknowledgement of her inarticulateness suggests that the immigrant will forever be unable to communicate with America.

The “clean society” serves like any other public institution in that it cuts off any attempts at meaningful ties. In order for this heroine to find America and thus find her own potential, she must form her own attachments. Just when all hope seems lost, a friend arrives. A former teacher, this well-timed friend is described in almost ethereal terms, reflecting the same language used earlier to describe John Barnes: “the unconscious emanation of her beautiful spirit” leads our protagonist to believe that her friend can view and understand “the color and texture of her dreams,” despite having minimal interactions with her (*HH* 175). Despite being a member of the “clean society” that has denigrated the protagonist, Miss Van Ness acts as an angelic nurse in this brief encounter, “with a look in her eyes and a sound in her voice that was like healing oil over the bruises of my soul” (*HH* 176). This hyperbole emphasizes the importance of this moment of kindness and understanding in the life of the narrator. “The mere touch of that woman’s hand in mine so overwhelmed me, that I burst out crying in the street,” she narrates (*HH* 176). That tears stem from such a brief touch indicates the intense force of an emotional connection after a drought of feeling. Miss Van Ness acts a balm, in direct opposition to the “cold scrutiny” of the dean of the college.

The dean, too, tries to heal, but her methods prove unsuccessful for our narrator. Unlike the beatific teacher, the dean has no bedside manner, no kindness that magically emanates from her. The dean is furthermore ensconced firmly in a public and restricted

space: an office. When the narrator visits the dean in her office, she feels “as one strapped on the operating table watches the surgeon approaching with his tray of sterilized knives” (*HH* 164). The sterile imagery associated with the dean and the “clean society” makes the college an unpleasant and unfeeling atmosphere. Furthermore, the narrator feels restricted, held down like an unwilling patient, by those who would ostensibly wish to lift her up through education. These “icebergs of convention” (*HH* 175) are incapable of bringing out the narrator’s potential. The counterpublic formed outside of the formal settings of the office and classroom, however, proves a productive relation.

The possibilities of friendship, however, are perfect for transforming feelings into ideas. Though the narrator finds her thoughts to be “unutterable,” in the presence of the teacher’s kindness, she cannot stop telling her story. “Just as contact with [the dean] had tied and bound all my thinking processes, so Miss Van Ness unbound and freed me and suffused me with light,” discovers the narrator (*HH* 177). This moment is revelatory for the narrator because it presents both intellectual and emotional freedom, both of which she has apparently always sought. This short story closes on the proclamation “America! I found America” (*HH* 177). This thrill of friendly understanding locates the meaning of America—American identity and the dream of success and belonging—in emotive connection. This idea is repeated at the end of *Hungry Hearts*. The last story, “How I Found America,” fulfills the title with another meaningful encounter between teacher and student. The final lines are remarkably similar to those of “Soap and Water”: “Through my inarticulate groping and reaching-out I had found the soul—the spirit—of America!” (*HH* 298). Again, Yeziarska conflates America with friendliness, suggesting

that emotional connections and a sense of community and understanding are key to success and survival. “Finding America” and finding one’s worth (whether as a scholar, artist, or daughter) is a process of discovery that requires making a connection with someone else. Experiencing love and understanding leads Yeziarska’s protagonists to their own dreams of America.

Produced out of caring communities, the resulting art objects in these texts are themselves sentimentally attached to their artists and showcase that attachment. Even though some of these women have attempted to shake off their communities once artistic development is completed, the evidence is still there in the deeply personal and emotive results of their work.

However, encountering joy via art and engagement is rife with danger. Hanneh Hayyeh’s elation at her own handiwork in her kitchen is crushed when the landlord raises the rent. In admiring Hanneh’s renovation, the butcher exclaims that its cheery cleanliness “tears out the eyes from the head!” (*HH* 74). This rough idiom conveys a violence that Hanneh cannot imagine until she is thrown out onto the street by her landlord. Yeziarska’s heroines are frequently tormented by that which promises freedom and happiness—Sara Smolinsky achieves her goal of becoming a schoolteacher only to end up as her father’s caretaker, and Shenah Pessah finds that the wings of love are not always airworthy.

These women must learn that while sentimental attachments can be productive and inspiring, they can also prove destructive. Yeziarska posits that once a community has served its purpose, then the artist can leave it behind. If not, that community can be draining. Yeziarska seems uneasy with this aspect of her *künstlerroman*. Does Yeziarska

want to celebrate the transformative and productive potential of communities? Or does she see them primarily as a rudimentary element of development? For some of her protagonists, the community seems more real and more desirable than the vague dream of success. One example is the young writer in *Hungry Hearts* named Sara. Sara tries to elevate her writing style by emulating Ralph Waldo Emerson, whose work she admires. However, it is not until she listens to her neighbors that she hears the voice she most understands, a voice that she finds within herself. Thus, she unlocks her artistic potential only when she engages with a real community—her imitations of Emerson thereafter seem hollow. Hanneh Breineh also finds that a community nurtures her and offers her freedom on her own terms, but the same cannot be said of social and economic success. Financial stability and a new uptown address constrain Hanneh’s spirit and estrange her from that which she loves best: her community. She claims that she lived more grandly in the tenement because at least she had friends and could do what she liked, unencumbered by social niceties and expectations. Unlike Shenah’s failed but nonetheless fruitful connection with John, these two stories illustrate strong community-building without the threat of assimilation. Sara and Hanneh, by recognizing the supportive effects of their “home” communities, make a strong case against assimilation. In turn, Yeziarska mounts a defense of ethnic modernism by showing how creative capacities can be enhanced through strengthened ties to a community.

Often, though Yeziarska’s characters find their voices or talents and enjoy a modicum of economic or social success, their stories end not on a triumphant note but with a call back to their pasts. In particular, Hanneh Breineh’s story, “The Fat of the Land,” indicates the emptiness of the American dream. In “The Fat of the Land,”

Hanneh discovers that wealth is less fulfilling than friendship in the slums. In fact, the material comforts Hanneh finds herself in are actually uncomfortable and unpleasant. Back in the Lower East Side, her former neighbor Mrs. Pelz is befuddled. ““What greater friend is there on earth than the dollar?”” Mrs. Pelz’s asks Hanneh (*HH* 202). Moving up the socioeconomic ladder requires assimilation and a complete disavowal of Hanneh’s tenement ties. But Hanneh explains that her successfully Americanized children ““want to make [her] over for an American lady, and [she’s] different”” (203). The result of this change in fortune is a complete lack of intimate engagements with others. Hanneh finds that she has nowhere to go, and nowhere truly feels like home. Walking alone through her former neighborhood, “she realized that she no longer could endure the sordid ugliness of her past, and yet she could not go home” (*HH* 222). Hanneh finally has “the fat of the land” at her fingertips, yet she cannot enjoy it alone. This is a common, recognized trope in Yeziarska’s work. According to Wendy Zierler, “Anzia Yeziarska’s fictions are tinged with sadness and disappointment, with a sense that the promise of America can never truly be found” (*HH* 418). In the examples of Hanneh Breineh trying to salvage her identity and her freedom amid a newer, more financially comfortable lifestyle and of Sara Smolinsky, professionally and romantically content but pulled back to care for her ailing father, we see this tension clearly.

Likewise, Sara Smolinsky’s “ascension” to an upper floor apartment over Hester Street marks her successful Americanization, but though it is an upward movement, it is constrained by her gender and ethnicity: “Yeziarska restricts most of the action to internal spaces and domestic scenes. Despite Sara’s final, iconic white room, the novel retains a claustrophobic atmosphere” (Boyle). For every heroine who seems shackled by her

community after achieving her version of success, there is another who yearns for her community. Yeziarska allows her characters to find communities fulfilling, making them vital to these narratives of achievement. However, by conceding that sometimes emotional attachments can be exhausting, that sometimes to remain successful they must be thrown off, Yeziarska follows a trait typical of the *künstlerroman*. This contradiction is evident in her own life. Even while Yeziarska was attempting to create intellectual and artistic communities of her own (during long sojourns in California, for example, or with John Dewey), she was ignoring her husband and daughter. And though Yeziarska was invigorated by her interactions with other thinkers, she often found herself alone, and she died in relative obscurity. She also perpetuated the myth of her own self-making, the brilliant artist who arose from the slums, indicating that her genius was innate and unpolished, despite her painstaking attempts at rendering the lives of Eastern European immigrants for a sophisticated readership.

Yeziarska's work highlights a tension between modernity and "Old World" ideals. This tension, played out in stories of artistic and emotional development, effectively reconciles the two binaries by privileging engagements with communities. The artistic and educational engagements experienced by her female protagonists serve to revise the *künstlerroman* and American dream narrative to privilege immaterial wealth over traditional markers of success. These engagements promote creativity and transformation. Solitude is important for the artist and the scholar—as shown in Sara Smolinsky's ecstasy at having her very own door to shut once she leaves her family—but to become someone special, these sentimental attachments must be made. The traditional *künstlerroman* requires forsaking all attachments. However, Yeziarska's work suggests



that, at least for women of the period, these attachments are necessary for realizing the potential of the artist, for nurturing her and inspiring her.

## CHAPTER 4

### UNBECOMING AN ARTIST: ZELDA FITZGERALD'S *SAVE ME THE WALTZ* AND PASSIVE RESISTANCE

“*Save Me the Waltz* as Novel” is the inauspicious title of a 1976 article in the *Fitzgerald-Hemingway Review* (Cary). Is Zelda Fitzgerald’s sole published novel not usually read as such? What does it mean to suggest that her novel is *not* a novel? And *why* is it not one? This confusing article title and all of its troubling implications are but one example of a pattern of stripping *Save Me the Waltz* of its status as novel. In the rather brief history of scholarship on Zelda Fitzgerald’s writing, her novel has been called autobiography, oddity, and a poor attempt at capturing the success of her husband. Only rarely is it called a novel.

Despite issues of credit and negative treatments of her novel, there is no shortage of scholarship on the topic of Zelda Fitzgerald herself. She is the subject of many recent novels, including a graphic novel.<sup>4</sup> Writers have been fascinated by her medical history, her nearly mythic status as a Montgomery belle, her iconic status as flapper ingénue, and, most especially, her marriage to F. Scott Fitzgerald. Surprisingly, her own creative endeavors—whether as dancer, painter, or author—have not garnered nearly as much attention. Biographer Sally Cline suggests that critics have not taken Zelda Fitzgerald’s

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<sup>4</sup> *Superzelda: The Graphic Life of Zelda Fitzgerald* by Tiziana Lo Porto and *Z: A Novel of Zelda Fitzgerald* by Therese Anne Fowler both came out in March 2013. Erika Robuck’s *Call Me Zelda* and R. Clifton Spargo’s *Beautiful Fools: The Last Affair of Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald* followed in May.

work more seriously because it smacks of dilettantism—after a brief relationship with ballet, we have only a few paintings, one novel, and an assortment of short stories and essays by which to evaluate her. Furthermore, the abstract quality of her writing, in addition to being vastly different from her husband’s style, has perhaps put off otherwise interested readers (Cline 2). Even the critics who claim to read her written work on its own merits do so by invoking complicated comparisons to her medical records, her life, and her husband’s work.

Some critics treat *Save Me the Waltz* as autobiography, assuming that the protagonist, Alabama Beggs, is an exact match with her author (Hartnett, Wood). Reading the novel as autobiography is a minor issue, however, when confronted with the ways in which it has been continually disregarded or criticized as an amateurish effort by a jealous wife. Not only does Henry Dan Piper claim that *Save Me the Waltz* is merely “an expression of [her] envy and a bitter attack on [F. Scott] Fitzgerald,” he also claims that such envy was unwarranted; her jealousy was simply “one of the symptoms of her illness” (126). Piper, like many other critics, is incapable of reading the novel without the lens of the sanitarium in which it was written. Harsh critiques are fairly common in early scholarship on the novel. In Harry T. Moore’s introduction to the 1967 reprinting, the novel is described as a “literary curio” and a “problem” (vii, ix). In this same introduction, the word “masterpiece” is used to describe F. Scott Fitzgerald’s work three times. “Obviously,” Moore tells us, “*Save Me the Waltz* is not at [F. Scott Fitzgerald’s] height of achievement” (xi).

Though these critiques are dismissive and often blatantly sexist, they come close to highlighting a central component of the novel. To call *Save Me the Waltz* and its

author a failure is cruel, but the novel is certainly *about* failure. And, perhaps surprisingly, this failure *succeeds*—Alabama’s failure as a dancer, wife, and mother is liberating, confusing, and distinctive. *Save Me the Waltz* may have bombed at its publication, but it provides a model of feminist failure that refuses to participate in the comparative conversations of its critics.

Alabama becomes neither a successful artist nor a fulfilled wife and mother, so it is little wonder that readers have struggled to read the novel as an affirmative *künstlerroman*. However, in her artistic and domestic failures, Alabama illustrates the positive capacities of failure. In *The Queer Art of Failure*, Halberstam posits that failure has positive, even liberating, properties. Halberstam points to theorists who use “antifeminist acts and activities to point to the limits of a feminist theory that already presumes the form that agency must take” (127). Halberstam asks us why we persist in our narrow definitions of agency. Why can’t spectacular failure also connote agency? Following Halberstam<sup>5</sup>, I will argue that it is precisely in her failures that Alabama Beggs achieves agency.

Arguing for the autonomy of Fitzgerald’s heroine seems hopeless when Fitzgerald herself is so rarely treated as an individual author. Moore’s dismissive method of introducing a novel by comparing it unfavorably to a similar novel by the author’s spouse highlights a recurring problem with discussions of Zelda Fitzgerald’s work: her novel is too often read as analogue to *Tender is the Night*, her stories too often clouded by the question of collaborative authorship, and her identity too intimately bound up with the

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<sup>5</sup> Since Halberstam has published work on failure and shadow feminism under both “Jack” and “Judith” in separate mediums, I have chosen to use the first initial in my bibliography. Halberstam is admittedly “loosey-goosey” about pronouns and prefers to go by “Jack,” avoiding gendered pronouns altogether, so I will use “Halberstam” where a pronoun would typically fit. To read more about Jack’s preferred pronouns, see this 2012 blog post: <http://www.jackhalberstam.com/on-pronouns/>

fictionalized flapper versions of herself created by her famous husband. The authorship question is an important one that still deserves attention. We know that F. Scott Fitzgerald was initially unsupportive of *Save Me the Waltz* and edited out many of the unflattering passages regarding David Knight, the painter-husband character, including changing his name from Amory Blaine.<sup>6</sup> Zelda Fitzgerald's influence on his work has perhaps been understated—especially since short stories published under both his name and their joint byline were apparently chiefly her work. Koula Svokos Hartnett notes that “copies of their essays or stories which bear both their names show a big X over Scott's name—Zelda's way of indicating that he was *not* the author. On others, she writes in her own name to prove that *she* was!” (128).

Literary scholarship purporting to focus on *Save Me the Waltz* usually discusses *Tender is the Night* at length. Biographies of Zelda Fitzgerald inevitably tell the story of Scott's upbringing, Princeton experience, and rise to fame—all of which of course occurs prior to their marriage. Fitzgerald's work continues to be regarded as a “quaint footnote to Scott's literary career” (Sullivan 33).<sup>7</sup> This attitude has resulted in scholarship that focuses on the Fitzgeralds' lives rather than the text.<sup>8</sup> As Victoria Sullivan aptly notes,

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<sup>6</sup> This story has been repeated and proven with correspondence and doctors' records in nearly all biographical scholarship on Fitzgerald. Nancy Milford's biography features an in-depth discussion of Scott Fitzgerald's frustration with Zelda's writing. The name change is significant because Amory Blaine is the protagonist of F. Scott Fitzgerald's debut novel *This Side of Paradise*, which is generally accepted to be greatly influenced by his own boyhood and college years.

<sup>7</sup> For this reason, I have chosen to break from tradition in my method of citing the Fitzgeralds. Typically, work dealing with both authors takes the route of referring to them by their first names. Older scholarship nearly always refers to F. Scott Fitzgerald by his last name and to Zelda Fitzgerald by her first. I find this a problematic move, as referring to “Zelda” seems informal at best and belittling at worst. Throughout this chapter, I will call the primary focus of my study by her last name, as is conventional in literary scholarship. On the rare occasions I might need to name her husband, I will do so by calling him by his full name. Hopefully this will sidestep any clarity issues while still affording Zelda Fitzgerald her due.

<sup>8</sup> Anne Valdene Clemens provides a useful overview of the major biographies of the Fitzgeralds: those by Sara Mayfield, Nancy Milford, Arthur Mizener, and Andrew Turnbull. Clemens highlights the problems and biases evident in these biographies, citing the omissions, generalizations, perpetuation of myths, and differing perspectives that have colored all Fitzgerald scholarship since. There have really only been two

when critics do not treat *Save Me the Waltz* as a novel, they “have relieved themselves of the need to discuss Zelda’s artistry—her ironic technique, her thematic concerns, her use of recurring metaphor” (34). In other words, critics have too often taken the literature out of their literary scholarship. Sarah Beebe Fryer agrees that much Zelda Fitzgerald scholarship focuses on her marriage and her mental illness, leaving the actual substance of her work neglected, despite the apparent wealth of material on it. Fryer argues that though she is “often casually dismissed as Scott’s neurotic wife,” Fitzgerald “deserves to be recognized at last as a spokeswoman for the women of her generation stranded between the old ideal of feminine subservience to men and the new ideal of equality” (325). How does Fitzgerald negotiate these tensions? Is there a clear path from this older model of femininity to the promise of new opportunities?

Rather than take up yet another comparison between Alabama Beggs and Zelda Fitzgerald or Nicole Diver, I will focus on Alabama’s unhappy and ultimately unfruitful development as an artist. Moore’s preference for *Tender is the Night* over *Save Me the Waltz* is due not only to the “finished craftsmanship” of the former; he argues that *Tender* is unique because of its “authentically tragic center: the gifted man who destroys himself” (xi, x). However, this “tragic center” is readily apparent in *Save Me the Waltz*. *Save Me the Waltz* is a would-be *künstlerroman*. Though Alabama endures intense training in ballet and even accepts an offer to dance professionally, her dance career is thwarted at every turn—either by her physical injury or her husband’s lack of support. In her introduction to Fitzgerald’s collected works, Mary Gordon states that *Save Me the Waltz* could almost be called a *bildungsroman* but for its lack of introspection and its

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biographical studies that attempt to focus solely on Zelda Fitzgerald, by Nancy Milford and Sally Cline. Attempting to extricate her life experiences and motivations from that of her husband proves nearly impossible, however, and attention is still split between the two of them.

emphasis on the “sensual” as opposed to “psychological” (xxi). While Gordon notes that such a classification may be considered due to the novel’s focus on the “creation of a self,” she neglects the possibility that by creating a superficial, sensual self, the novel and its protagonist are in fact engaging in an artistic, rather than strictly personal, growth (xxi). The central theme of the novel is difficult to parse, however, because despite Fitzgerald’s lush descriptions, critics have found that the novel “is not a smooth whole” and lacks a coherent narrative voice (Sullivan 35). These stylistic moves align with her subject matter, however, as, somewhat paradoxically, Alabama Beggs becomes increasingly distanced from her body even as she becomes more confident and sure of herself.

This split between a confident agent and the well-trained body highlights the novel’s unique take on gender performativity. Alabama tries to find a way to perform her femininity without subjecting herself to a patriarchal structure—she believes she can do this through ballet, but she ultimately fails. By making herself into an art object, she becomes disassociated from her own body. She is still a passive object in an androcentric realm, in which all the art objects (dancers) are beholden to the ballet master, the judgment of the audience, and the male patrons of the ballet. Further complicating Alabama’s relationship to ballet is its effect on her body. Instead of feminizing her and allowing her to retain socially acceptable characteristics such as grace and cultural refinement, ballet transforms her into something very ugly: a particularly good rehearsal for Alabama means feeling “like a gored horse in the bull ring, dragging its entrails” (Fitzgerald 154). Throughout the novel, grotesque depictions of the body remove any illusion that ballet is a delicate art form.

Alabama's attempt at performing her gender identity outside of a domestic sphere fails miserably—she finds that the hard work and her obsession with becoming a professional dancer pulls her further and further away from the domestic sphere as well as herself. Her relationship to art is ultimately destructive, both for Alabama and for her family. There is no happy ending for the woman artist in Zelda Fitzgerald's fiction.<sup>9</sup>

Alabama's tragic end, in which a blister turns into an infection that ends her dance career, is partially due to her inability to adhere to gender norms. She forsakes her family and friends and spends all of her time practicing. She overworks herself to the point that in the mirror she sees not as a woman but a machine. Her dedication confuses and dismays those around her, yet she is blind to everything but the steps. This blindness allows her to take little notice of what she thinks must be an innocuous blister. And as Alabama loses herself in dance, she becomes increasingly alien both to herself and to others, and this eventually leads to Alabama being alone in her illness, subject to Italian-speaking doctors and her own hallucinations. Engagement with norms is necessary for our bodies to enter into "the domain of cultural intelligibility" (Butler 2). Our choice to adhere to gender norms is a choice to be legible—to refuse those norms is to risk unintelligibility. When Alabama insists on rejecting the prescribed ways of wife and mother in favor of modifying her body for ballet, she risks unintelligibility. The results of that risk appear to be chaos and destruction.

Yet, Alabama seems at ease with her changing body even when it appears foreign to her. Getting to know her body's limitations in ballet class leads her to approach each new challenge in the following way: "She said to herself, 'My body and I,' and took

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<sup>9</sup> The only woman artists Fitzgerald shows us in her short fiction are flighty, miserable, and unsuccessful types. See especially "Our Own Movie Queen," "The Original Follies Girl," and "The Girl with Talent."



herself for an awful beating” (Fitzgerald 125). In her ability to process her increasing disassociation with her own body and in her nonchalance once her dance career is over, Alabama exemplifies what Halberstam terms an “un-subject.” Un-subjects are those “Who refuse to speak; subjects who unravel, who refuse to cohere,” and who ultimately reject embodying the role of woman (“The Artist”). *Save Me the Waltz* can be read as either a success or a failure. Alabama may not become a professional ballerina, but she succeeds in unraveling herself. Halberstam refers to this unbecoming as “shadow feminism,” types of art and performance in which there is not a subject, just an “un-subject.”<sup>10</sup> “Shadow feminists,” Halberstam explains, “take the form not of becoming, being, and doing but of shady, murky modes of undoing, unbecoming, and violating” (*Queer Art* 4). Halberstam’s examples of popular films and performance art articulate that there is promise and opportunity in unique failures, whereas success is less meaningful or interesting. Halberstam is building on an ongoing conversation about negativity in queer theory that seeks to find political efficacy in bad feelings and in a tumultuous history incapable of recuperation. Heather Love finds that “weak feelings” are usually associated with inaction (13). These negative feelings can be paralyzing and disorienting, the exact opposite of a mobilizing or transformative force, but Love argues that “the aim is to turn grief into grievance—to address the larger social structures, the regimes of domination, that are at the root of such pain” (151). In short, the ability to use failure, or “weak feelings,” to fuel the anger and hurt can address the systemic inequality in an unexpected way.

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<sup>10</sup> Halberstam uses artist Marina Abramovic as a key example of this new kind of feminism. In Abramovic’s “The Artist is Present,” though the artist sits motionlessly while making eye contact with the viewer, she is actually *not* present at all, Halberstam argues. This absence and apparent relinquishment of subjectivity troubles us and pushes us, and in that way creates a startling type of resistance.

Failure has the capacity to teach and reveal. This is not the sort of feminism that celebrates sisterhood or engages in coalition-building. Rather, these “shadow feminisms” are “feminisms rooted in pain and desire, struggle and desire, broken relationships and desire” (“The Artist”). It is “a feminism that fails to save others or to replicate itself, a feminism that finds purpose in its own failure” (*Queer Art* 128). Shadow feminism is rooted in negation, refusal, and passivity; it is an “anti-social feminism” (*Queer Art* 129). Therefore, it deflects any attempts at meaningful connection, making it a good fit for the tortured solo artist. If we read Alabama’s *künstlerroman* as a sort of prototype of Halberstam’s “shadow feminism,” we can see that the artist’s journey reaches a dead end because she does not achieve autonomy as a woman or as an artist. And yet, that journey is itself indicative of autonomy and choice. Shadow feminism “speaks in the language of self-destruction, masochism, and antisocial femininity, and a refusal of the essential bond of mother and daughter” (*Queer Art* 124). Halberstam asserts that in shadow feminism failure has its own rewards; it can be a form of resistance in an oppressive culture. Compliance can be as much of an important choice as resistance—compliance can indicate agency (*Queer Art* 126). Thinking about the transgressive potential of failure in the context of *Zelda Fitzgerald’s* work allows for a reading that extends beyond a biographical study. While reading Alabama (and Fitzgerald) as victim of a bullying husband is interesting, this reading re-victimizes the woman by assuming that she has no agency. Halberstam encourages us to see subordination as an agented action and disregard the notion that freedom and agency look alike for everyone (*Queer Art* 127).

Alabama unravels herself by giving over her body to rigorous ballet training, overworking her body to the point that she no longer recognizes it as her own. She does

this in order to remove her body from the ownership of her husband—yet, one may argue this effort fails since his next series of paintings focuses on dancers, bodies manipulated by his paintbrushes. Alabama is an early example of “subjects who unravel, who refuse to cohere; subjects who refuse being” in order to overcome oppression (*Queer Art* 126). Especially compelling about Alabama is that she refuses being even while she attempts to achieve it. Her development as an artist seems to follow a typical *künstlerroman* narrative; feeling inspired and driven, she forsakes other commitments and gives herself over completely to her art.

Instead of finding herself in ballet, however, she becomes a dancer in lieu of a fully realized self. She is no longer Alabama Beggs Knight, but a ballerina with a body that belongs to the dance. As the artist is formed, the self is negated. In this seemingly passive act, “we find a feminism that stages a refusal to become woman and that locates this refusal deep in the heart of masochistic pain/pleasure dynamics” (“The Artist”). Alabama performs this refusal in the way she takes up and then relinquishes dance. Alabama does not want to be a doting mother or a quietly supportive wife, so she turns to ballet. As she pushes herself to achieve the lean, muscular body of a dancer, she also loses her sense of self. There is no artist or subject—just an art object in her stead. *Save Me the Waltz* is thus not a failure as a novel, nor does its heroine fail as a dancer. Rather, both novel and protagonist present a form of resistance to patriarchal models of artistry and existence.

While previous critics have only found the negative in Fitzgerald’s negation, there are distinctly productive ways in which she unravels the *künstlerroman* narrative. The novel both is and is not a traditional *künstlerroman*. It seems to follow a standard

trajectory, as Alabama realizes a few moments of artistic success, but then these moments of genius are quashed by reminders of her gender, her position, and her status as art object.

Complicating Alabama's quest to realize her artistic potential is her struggle to know herself as a subject. As a child, she continually struggles to sketch a recognizable image of herself. Seeing a family characteristic reflected in herself is likened to suddenly discovering she had a fifth toe, showing the reader that her default setting is incomplete or abnormal. She exists feeling like she has four toes, and only a sense of belonging to her family and having some sort of readily-defined and identifiable identity gives her a fifth toe (Fitzgerald 19).

Fitzgerald makes it clear that Alabama is an independent creature struggling against the yoke of societal norms. Her parents make very limited, halfhearted efforts at disciplining her, and she thinks of herself as a product of her own creation. When Alabama asks her mother what she was like as a baby, her mother responds only that she was "a good baby" (5). These brief and unsentimental interactions with her family shape Alabama's vision of herself:

the girl has been filled with no interpretation of herself, having been born so late in the life of her parents that humanity had already disassociated itself from their intimate consciousness and childhood become more of a concept than the child. She wants to be told what she is like, being too young to know that she is like nothing at all and will fill out her skeleton with what she gives off, as a general might reconstruct a battle following the advances and recessions of his forces with bright-colored pins. She does not know that what effort she makes will become herself. It was much later that the child, Alabama, came to realize that the bones of her father could indicate only her limitations. (6)

Though only a child, Alabama already struggles with the notion of her self-making as she seeks an image to which she can attach herself. With no idea about who she is in relation

to her family, either as a baby or a growing child, she sees only a hazy future. Even the reflections of the narrator impose a projection of violence on this task of self-conception: coming into one's own is analogous to a military general's study of a battle already finished. Although, significantly, whether this metaphorical battle was won or lost goes unmentioned.

The language in this passage also suggests that Alabama is already actively unbecoming a subject. "What effort she makes will become herself," and since she can never really belong to herself, she decides to make no effort whatsoever. The skeleton imagery also indicates her own activity and willingness in her unbecoming. As she contemplates the bare bones of herself, she realizes that she is in charge of filling out the flesh and meat. The skeleton metaphor gives her the illusion of control. If she is really nothing more than a skeleton, than she has limitless possibilities for self-expression and creation. It is a Gothic and uncomfortable metaphor, but it also seems liberating.

Unfortunately, the bones of a patriarchal system form the framework and thus the limits of what Alabama can become. The lack of ties to a past, a family, or a heritage trouble young Alabama, but as an adult she recognizes that those ties can only hinder her—"the bones of her father" ground her in a hierarchical institution (the family, the South) that will see to it that any attempt at autonomy will be an uphill battle. This impulse to align oneself with a larger institution, even while it imposes limits, presents a continual struggle for Alabama.

Alabama negotiates this struggle in her public attempts at achieving an identity. She is a born performer: "I am only really myself when I'm somebody else whom I have endowed with these wonderful qualities from my imagination," she explains to a stranger

(Fitzgerald 70). Alabama Beggs is always performing in one way or another. As a young girl, she revels in the neighborhood gossip concerning her. “I never let them down on the dramatic possibilities of a scene,” she reflects, “I give a damned good show” (29). The “show” is an important part of Alabama’s identity. She is eager as a young girl to better understand and fit in with her family, actively seeking stories that might provide her with a clear heritage. After listening to stories about her maternal grandfather, Alabama reacts with relief: “There was a show to join. Time would take care of that, and she would have a place, inevitably—somewhere to enact the story of her life” (20). For Alabama, performance spins out into belonging. Identity and home are inextricably bound for her. She craves the dramatic possibilities of life because the “show” is something she believes she inherits; it is a promise to be fulfilled.

The metaphorical show of life quickly manifests itself as a more literal stage-bound performance. Dance first appears in the novel with Alabama’s performance at the “Beauty Ball,” an endeavor she undertakes with Randolph McIntosh, a local reporter and dance teacher and her sister Dixie’s beau. As Alabama dances, she responds to the audience’s comments from the stage. “‘The child has talent,’ they said, ‘it should be cultivated’” (13). Alabama immediately rejects this suggestion of order and instruction. Shouting from the stage, she claims “‘I made it up myself’” (13). This confident moment shows Alabama performing in multiple ways. First, she continues dancing while she attends to and addresses the audience’s commentary. She manages to step out of the dance recital long enough to respond to her critics, but it’s a seamless transition from artist to curator. Secondly, her performance in this scene has the added element of dishonesty. Her claim that she choreographed the piece is not entirely accurate—she

collaborated with Randolph, and in fact it was his idea that she participate in the first place. Her sin of omission in her response to audience feedback allows her to paint herself as a sole genius—not only is she a beauty, a talented dancer, and a responding member of the audience and of her town, she is also now a choreographer. Wearing so many hats in this public arena allows Alabama to grasp a link to an identity (or, in this case, many identities), which is something that she cannot find at home.

This artistic triumph is short-lived, however. Randolph compliments her performance, and she shuts down: “The girl hung there on his words like a vestment waiting to be put on” (13). Her curtain call is followed by Randolph kissing her, and this interaction removes her from herself. Her momentary identification and recognition on stage vanishes as she finds herself “conjured up behind his shoulders by the kiss” (13). Alabama is no longer the object of her own self-making; Randolph “conjures” her when he takes note of her desirability and acts on it. In this moment, she no longer has ownership of herself or her body: “She was afraid; she thought her heart was a person walking. It was. It was everybody walking at once. The show was over” (13). Her fear and shock are evident in these abrupt, repetitive sentences. The violent imposition of male desire on what should be a celebratory moment crushes her confidence and effectively negates her success on stage. Not only is the show over, but whatever Alabama may have achieved as a dancer is now finished. Immediately after Randolph’s kiss, he implores her to join a young man on the dance floor. “‘I’ve never danced. I’m scared,’” is her bewildering response.

Dancing is repeatedly described as something that happens *to* Alabama and occurs outside of herself. When she first envisions herself as a professional ballerina, her

thoughts take her outside her body, and she views her dancer self from a distance:

“Alabama visualized herself suavely swaying to the end of a violin bow [...] She pictured herself as an amorphous cloud in a dressing room mirror [...] She followed herself along a stone corridor” (Fitzgerald 114). She sees herself going through these motions, but, importantly, she is not herself—she is small enough to be “spinning on [the] silver bobbin” of a violin, or she is the reflection of a shapeless cloud. She does not experience being these things; rather, she sees them as if she is having an out-of-body experience, sans the distinct form of the body.

When Alabama’s body is present in the narrative, it is hardy and strong, at odds with the mystical nothingness she describes above. When her friend Dickie assures her that taking up dance is a great idea since she has the right body for it, Alabama ponders this by running “secretly over her body. It was rigid, like a lighthouse” (114). She arrives at the conclusion that ““it might do,”” a hesitant assessment of the only tool she has. The marked shift from “amorphous cloud” to concrete, phallic structure signifies her own warring interpretations of herself. She is either a wispy nothing or the lighthouse, shapeless and directionless or a beacon. Later, she wields her body like a weapon, “like a lance in steady hands” (Fitzgerald 150). Though Alabama’s view of her body continually shifts, its one consistency is the pain she associates with ballet. Even when she is watching others dance, Alabama is aware of the presence of physical hardship. “It had physically hurt her to see the steely body of the dancer snapping and whipping itself in the mad convolutions of those turns” (Fitzgerald 133). It is in this pain that she finds order and structure. The “steely” body she watches is not unlike her own “lance” or



“lighthouse” figure. These rigidly formed and purposeful bodies provide guidance and form to that which would otherwise seem chaotic.

At the novel’s close, she intimates that marriage is partially to blame for this internal disunity. When some party guests tell the Knights that they are a lucky couple, Alabama corrects them: ““You mean that we’ve parted with segments of ourselves more easily than some people—granted that we were ever intact”” (210). She implies she (and perhaps “people” generally) are not inherently complete, ordered beings. This aligns with her childhood desires to know more about how she should be and finding only unsatisfactorily vague answers. This incoherence is worsened by the sacrifices Alabama experiences in her marriage to David, in which segments of themselves must be removed.

The incoherence in her adult life mirrors her childhood identity crisis, and Fitzgerald links the two clearly by once again using skeleton imagery. Alabama’s “growing feeling of alarm” regarding her marriage leads to a redoubling of her efforts at the barre (Fitzgerald 129). “Pulling the skeleton of herself over a loom of attitude and arabesque she tried to weave the strength of her father and the young beauty of her first love with David, the happy oblivion of her teens and her warm protected childhood into a magic cloak,” but weaving bones is bound to fail. Instead of a beautiful tapestry, she’ll have something brittle, grotesque, and unrecognizable. This line is one singular stretch, a moment of conscious thought, but it somehow encapsulates the entirety of her life up to this point, and it’s a life that has been dominated by male authority figures. Her magic cloak is constructed of her relationships with these men and is therefore just an escape into modes of feminine subservience rather than a new creation. The choice of the weaving metaphor significantly alludes to the domestic sphere that Alabama has already

rejected. The very next sentence hints at her disappointment with her limited options: “She was much alone” (129). Alabama’s feelings of isolation both in the studio and in her marriage imply a sort of unwilling confinement, feelings also conveyed during her hospitalization for her foot infection. Mary Wood suggests that this is an echo of Fitzgerald’s experience at the Phipps Clinic. Fitzgerald worked on *Save Me the Waltz* during her stay at Phipps, during which time she was encouraged to write an “asylum biography.” Wood argues that Fitzgerald makes a “strategic” choice in describing emotional breakdown via a physical manifestation, going “against the expectations for asylum autobiography, expectations that would shape and constrict her narrative” (Wood 248).

Fitzgerald uses a metaphor of physical injury to convey the state of the Knights’ marriage. Just as an injury confines Alabama to a hospital bed and eventually the domestic sphere, so does her unequal marriage. Fitzgerald foreshadows these consequences of Alabama’s injury when she writes, “obligations were to Alabama a plan and a trap laid by civilization to ensnare and cripple her happiness and hobble the feet of time” (102). Hartnett argues that Alabama “discovers that, after all, marriage and family are the most important elements in a woman’s life,” and that “a career is a curse” portending doom for all (131). However, the very opposite seems to hold true. Her career is not the curse—her marriage is. Her injury is caused by her overwork and oversight, which is the result of her incredible devotion to ballet. This devotion is directly related to her miserable life at home. She uses ballet to flee from David, Bonnie, and endless and meaningless social engagements. Tracing back through the novel, it

becomes clear that for Alabama, the real crippling injury is her toxic relationship with David.

In her attempt to assume the role of the quiet and supportive wife, Alabama does not speak much, usually reserving her remarks for the perfect time. Alabama feels the necessity to store up any clever stories or witty lines for a moment when she can truly shine, and she frets during a dinner party over the timing of a rehearsed remark (Fitzgerald 108-109). She protects her creative and intellectual endeavors fiercely, so it is incredibly disheartening to see her husband appropriate her work. David steals Alabama's credit more than once. David's major success in the art world comes when he turns to the subject of the ballet after Alabama's injury. David takes full credit for the idea of portraying the dance, with no reference to his wife's former career (209). Earlier, when David suggestively jokes about another woman's underwear, Alabama is infuriated: "He'd stolen the idea from her. She'd worn silk BVD's herself all last summer" (110). Furthermore, he invites others to touch her body and delights in showing off her finely developed muscles "as if she were one of his pictures" (Fitzgerald 147).

Issues of credit spring up in much of the biographical studies of the Fitzgeralds. More recent feminist scholars are quick to villainize Scott Fitzgerald, citing his "tyrannical reign" over his family and his plagiarism of Fitzgerald's diaries and letters (Hartnett 172). While some critics wish to apply the model of this dependent relationship to the Fitzgerald marriage, insinuating that Fitzgerald did more writing than she was given credit for, Matthew J. Bruccoli attempted to refute these claims with his careful studies of Scott Fitzgerald's manuscripts and his *Ledger* in which their work was carefully differentiated and accounted for (xii). Milford's biography of Fitzgerald,

however, suggests that Scott's records only make note of when he assisted Zelda with her work—the many times she aided him by providing her ideas, sketches, letters, and diary entries go unnoted (Milford 114). Scottie Fitzgerald has voiced concern over the inaccuracy of stories of her mother as the “classic ‘put down’ wife, whose efforts to express her artistic nature were thwarted by a typically male chauvinist husband” (S. Fitzgerald v). There is a long and contentious history to this discussion of authorship and collaboration, which is perhaps why it is so easy (and irresistible!) to read David Knight as taking advantage of his wife's hard work.

There is no room for both a dancer and a painter in the Knights' marriage, and from the beginning their relationship is about “David, David, Knight, Knight, Knight, and Miss Alabama Nobody” (Fitzgerald 37). Critics have read Alabama as a character who self-constructs with disastrous results—but our reading of her (and the novel, and perhaps even Fitzgerald) radically changes when we read her instead as someone who willingly, and perhaps even happily, self-destructs. Once Alabama begins her ballet lessons, dance is constantly juxtaposed with her lackluster housekeeping and parenting. Alabama leaves the domestic sphere, but is inevitably drawn back into it and forced to give up her ballet career. Ballet allows Alabama an easy way to opt out of the oppressive power structure that is the family. Halberstam notes that “masochistic passivity” is directly related to broken mother/daughter bonds because it is “a mode of femininity that self-destructs” and thus destabilizes existing power structures (*Queer Art* 133).

Halberstam argues for the importance of breaking mother/daughter bonds in order to break out of a patriarchal system, but this is one area in which Fitzgerald's novel takes a different path toward feminist passivity. Since shadow feminism is grounded in

negation, mother/daughter bonds are one method for breaking the cycle of being bound to patriarchal oppression (*Queer Art* 124). Mother/daughter relationships in the novel are not destroyed, however—they are simply ignored. Alabama’s pregnancy is mentioned briefly, and the birth isn’t depicted at all. The reader is informed of Bonnie’s arrival via a congratulatory telegram from Alabama’s mother, and the Knights then depart for Europe on the very next page (Fitzgerald 46, 47). Alabama never develops much of a relationship with her daughter, Bonnie, and Alabama’s mother, Millie, is neither doting nor disciplinary. Instead of specifically rejecting or deconstructing a model of womanhood via mother/daughter bonds, Fitzgerald shows us another option. Fitzgerald allows her protagonist to pick another, better-suited role while neglecting, rather than outright rejecting, the mantle of wife and mother. Eventually, “Alabama realize[s] that she cannot rest as a function of her husband and her daughter” and turns to dance as a way “to justify her character” (Cary 71).

Alabama’s apparent refusal of gender norms is complicated by repeated inferences that her attempts to adhere to them are utter failures. David and baby Bonnie all but disappear from the text after Alabama becomes deeply invested in her training. David still attempts to control his wife and reassert the boundaries of the domestic sphere, however. David, for no other reason than having prior plans to go home to America for the spring, refuses Alabama’s desire to accept a prima ballerina position in Naples, though he vaguely promises to “try to arrange something in America” (Fitzgerald 162). Alabama senses that her dancing career will be over before it has begun if she expects David to arrange anything for her, so she immediately accepts the role and leaves Paris. Cary argues that Alabama is not just uninterested in fulfilling the role of wife and

mother—she is terrible at it. If we view Alabama’s many failures as intentional, however, then her flight to Naples and her seemingly callous disregard for her family appear more in the vein of self-preservation. Alabama’s domestic faults are too numerous and ridiculous to excuse by sheer lack of ability—a marked lack of interest is also present. Cary cites her poor household management (she has no control over the hired help and is an incompetent seamstress) and her ignorance about pregnancy and childbirth (70). In a hilariously absurd passage, the narrator notes that while everyone knows hangover remedies and where to find the best gin, “nobody knew how to have a baby” (Fitzgerald 46). David teases Alabama about her inability to darn properly, and they hire a butler they can’t afford after she cuts herself trying to open a can of beans (Fitzgerald 117, 51).

Alabama’s inability to sew or cook is played for humor, but her domestic failures point to a larger deficiency: her utter inability to conform to her role as woman. Even before she begins her ballet training, she does not try to mask her annoyance with David or the impatience and boredom she feels with her life as a wife and mother. In a scene meant to convey a night out in Paris with friends, the meaning of “party” turns into a metaphor for the domestic situation she is expected to facilitate. She coolly explains to her friends Dickie and Hastings that she’ll pay their bar tab, as it’s “my party,” and “I’ve been giving it for years” (115). She is not insinuating that she typically goes on endless benders; in fact, she cuts the evening short and in the very next scene shows her irritation with David’s all-night drinking. When Hastings inquires after her absent husband, asking why she did not invite him, her response is cutting. “Damn it,” she says, “I did [invite him]—so long ago that he forgot to come” (115). While she is

keeping the metaphorical party going, David is unaccounted for, not noticing or caring that she is miserable. When she further complains that her life is directionless, Hastings reminds her about her daughter Bonnie. Alabama merely replies that ““life goes on,”” suggesting that having a family is not synonymous with having a meaningful purpose (115). The endlessness of this domestically-rooted “party” seems to exhaust Alabama. Once her energies turn instead to ballet, she briefly notes her family’s unhappiness but is undeterred from her quest to become a ballerina: “her family grew very remote with the distention of her soul in stchay [sic] and pirouette” (Fitzgerald 132). These two movements are almost opposing. To “stcahy” (more commonly spelled chassé or sashay) is to move quickly across the floor in long, flowing steps, almost a sort of grounded series of leaps. This move would seem to symbolize Alabama’s desire to gracefully exit from her oppressive marriage. However, while the chassé would move her swiftly from one end of the stage to the next, the pirouette would keep her spinning in a fixed place. The mention of these two ballet steps in combination foreshadows that ballet is merely a placeholder for the sort of autonomy that Alabama can only hope to have. In other words, Alabama enjoys the illusion of the forward, fleeing movement, but she is ultimately spinning in place. As David and Bonnie drift further and further away from her, Alabama stretches what interiority she has into dance, implying that her conscious self is no longer present in the domestic sphere. This suggests that the ballet allows for some capacity of artistic and personal agency, whereas the domestic sphere stifles any attempts by Alabama to assert herself there. This aggressively pessimistic view of domesticity and marriage is evident when Alabama bemoans David’s absence and lack of cooperation in the aforementioned “parties.”

The sacrifices demanded by her ballet training allow her to turn a blind eye to the problems in her marriage. The language Fitzgerald uses to depict dancers' bodies, including Alabama's, implies a lack of ownership or even control. Alabama's first lesson is described thusly: "She pulled and twisted the long legs along the bar," and Madame "was literally stripping the muscles of her thighs. She could have cried out with pain" (122). There is no glamour or beauty in this depiction of ballet; it is a torturous exercise, one that forces Alabama to see her legs not as extensions of her body but as objects which she must manipulate. Yet, despite the searing pain, Alabama returns to the studio. Ballet completely subsumes her. Madame tells her that she should only get four hours of sleep; any more is far too much. Yet Madame also tells Alabama that she must do fifty stretches each night, but four hours of training a day is too much (Fitzgerald 122, 128). Buried in Madame's firm lessons is a warning that goes unnoticed by Alabama. Ballet is an exacting labor, yet it is possible to practice too much. Madame's confusing advice leads Alabama to focus on ballet at the exclusion of all else, and she becomes determined to be a great dancer at any cost. Her body, once described as a "quill" and as "loose and angular as those silver triangles in an orchestra" is completely transformed into an impersonal machine (121). Alabama "finally taught herself what it felt like to move the upper part of her body along as if it were a bust on wheels" (127). This grotesque simile dismembers her previously loose and frail body so that it is no longer recognizable as a body at all. Alabama has practiced for far too long, and the result is not a prima ballerina but an automaton.

Despite the disturbing imagery that accompanies Alabama's shift to machine, Alabama finds that illegibility (as a body and as a dancer) allows her to have some



freedom. Ballet, unlike marriage or heritage, creates order without betraying her.

“‘Consciousness,’ Alabama murmured to herself, ‘is an ultimate betrayal, I suppose’” (207). Alabama is speaking to herself, unheard by others, following a conversation with David about finding order in their lives. Though Fryer argues that Alabama “resolves to take up ballet in retaliation for David’s infidelity,” she seems to have multiple motivating factors driving her to dance (Fryer 323). Pleased with her ever-strengthening body, Alabama reflects that “the complete control of her body freed her from all fetid consciousness of it” (134). Alabama actively desires to unbecome herself and be released from her body. Furthermore, she takes no special pleasure in her achievements. She discovers that “pleasure in the dance is a hard-earned lesson” (Fitzgerald 150). Alabama embraces the pain and the pleasure of shadow feminism. Wood explains that “Alabama’s apparent escape from a conventional life and subsumed identity, an escape through artistic self-expression in dance, leads only to a profound experience of separation from herself” (256). This supreme feeling of separation within herself also leads to her separation from her family. David and Alabama’s disagreement over the opportunity in Naples allows Alabama to see that other options are available, and this marks not only a redoubled investment in her artistry but also the decline of their marriage.

Their marriage is in shambles well before Alabama’s job offer, however. The same night that Alabama and her friend Dickie consider Alabama’s potential as a dancer, David is out drinking. He does not arrive home until dawn, at which point Alabama cries into his arms and expresses a wish to be with him at all times. As he sleeps off his drunkenness, Alabama reflects on her life in a very vague passage: “Filing away her impressions like a person making a will, she bequeathed each passing sensation to that

momentary accumulation of herself, the present, that filled and emptied with the overflow” (117). This could be an important moment of self-actualization, as she compiles her thoughts in an orderly fashion, apparently creating a self in the process. However, the language of death and waste in this passage carry a pessimistic undertone. If a self consists only of bequeathed, fleeting moments, then a self seems a very flimsy thing made up of other people’s hand-me-downs. If this is what identity and agency look like to Alabama, it is little wonder that just a few pages before she is enraptured by ballet. Unlike her husband’s painting, dance is a transitory thing—a combination of movements that are over as soon as they have begun. Since Alabama sees identity as something constructed by sensations and easily erased, it is no wonder that dance appeals to her, especially as she endeavors to train her body into a variety of shapes: from graceful wisp to pure muscle to rigid machine. To be a fully-realized self is to be ever-changeable.

Fitzgerald repeats this idea about selves as mere receptacles to be filled and emptied on the final page of the novel, as Alabama dumps out ashtrays in a sloppy manner while her guests are still smoking and deems it “expressive” of herself. Alabama’s calculated negligence results in her career-ending infection and her disordered home. She throws herself fully into dance, and any injury serves as both proof of her dedication as well as willing self-mutilation. As her training intensifies, the Knights’ home becomes increasingly messy, but only in ways that relate specifically to ballet. The pile of dirty laundry is specified as dance attire, and the overstuffed cabinets and drawers are noted to be overflowing not with street clothes, but with her frilly skirts. But Alabama “wore herself to a frazzle, and didn’t notice about the room” (Fitzgerald 145). Her domestic failure suggests that a traditional feminine role is unsuitable and impractical

for her. But her repeated attempts at it and her nonchalant hostessing at the novel's close indicates something more than mere failure—her hurried dumping of ashtrays is “expressive” of her identity, perhaps because she has made the choice to submit and to do it poorly. This sort of passive resistance does not allow her any independence, but at the same time it gives her some agency. She will act the role of the supportive painter's wife, effectively sacrificing her own identity and giving up her artistic ambitions, but she will subvert the role by performing it inadequately. She is emblematic of Halberstam's “un-subject” in this way—more passive than passive aggressive, she nonetheless affects a mode of resistance to gender norms. Intentionally or unintentionally, her poor housekeeping suggests the possibility that such norms do not fit the subjects on whom they are imposed.

What is clear is that as an un-subject, Alabama's failure to achieve her dream of becoming a professional ballerina is not entirely a failure. Alabama “nearly succeeds in establishing her own sense of identity, independent of any man's opinion. Her failure to become a professional ballerina results purely from chance, not from any lack of ability or dedication to her efforts” (Fryer 325). She *does* win a contract to dance in Naples, and she *does* leave her husband and daughter behind in Paris. She develops the body of a dancer and when her career is over and the familial unit reunited, she does not become the wife and mother that David or Bonnie wish for her to be. She has ceased to be a subject at all. Back in the States to visit her ailing father, Alabama finds that she has no concrete identity. She demands of her father, ““Why do we spend years using up our bodies to nurture our minds with experience and find our minds turning then to our exhausted bodies for solace? Why, Daddy?”” (Fitzgerald 199). She has turned to her

patriarch for answers in her defeated state, only to learn that he does not know for what end she sacrificed her body. She tells him how her soul has deserted her and later muses that the rest of her life will be spent mulling over ballet steps, as they constitute “the only form she knew” (208).

While *Save Me the Waltz* seems to follow a traditional *künstlerroman* narrative, Alabama’s career-ending foot infection is but one way Fitzgerald toys with the genre. Alabama’s increasing disidentification with her family and her own body leads her not to the pinnacle of artistic realization. Rather, Alabama becomes unmoored from anything that may help her assert agency—she is subjected to the dance, and it transforms her not from patriarchal subject to liberated artist but from subject to object. Alabama’s life finds her continually beholden to someone (David, Bonnie, or her ballet master). These obligations thwart her attempts at creation and empowerment, but rather than reading the novel’s ending as spelling utter failure for Alabama, we can find resistance in the ways that she forces herself onto an artistic journey while willfully eschewing her domestic situation.

Alabama’s physical breakdown is often treated as an analogue to Fitzgerald’s mental breakdown, but Fitzgerald’s institutionalization should not bear so heavily on readings of this novel. *Save Me the Waltz* was completed during Fitzgerald’s stay at Phipps Clinic, during which time she also wrote frequent letters to her husband (Gordon xx). Fitzgerald’s letters from her asylum stays bear little stylistic resemblance to her novel, and she repeatedly asks for books and news from her ballet instructor.<sup>11</sup> The

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<sup>11</sup> Letters 54 and 56 in Bryer and Barks’s collection are particularly good examples of Fitzgerald’s lucid prose from this time.

letters do reveal a struggle for imaginative engagement similar to Alabama's, but they read quite soundly.

The comparisons between Fitzgerald's time at Phipps and Alabama's hospital stay are easy comparisons to make due to Alabama's frightening hallucinations. While she is hospitalized in Italy, she imagines the word "sick" coming to life, and it "woke Alabama gouging at her eyeballs with the prongs of its letters" (Fitzgerald 194). Alabama's career-killing infection is precipitated by many more indications that there is something amiss with her body. Namely, Alabama's body is not whole. The descriptions of dance reiterate the ways in which her body no longer belongs to her but to ballet, but they also suggest that her body is no longer legible as a body even to herself. While practicing, "her legs felt like dangling hams," and "her breasts hung like old English dugs" (Fitzgerald 154). Unlike the machine imagery used elsewhere in the novel which freezes her body into one solid object, this passage underlines the ways in which her intense focus results in a sort of dismemberment. The result is a mind/body split and an even more dramatic mutilation that forces Alabama to see herself not as a coherent entity but as a jumble of body parts and shapes.

The eventual decline of Alabama's body is a process that begins well before her ballet training, however. Alabama has never been a coherent, whole person; rather, she is an assemblage of character traits, art forms, and body parts. Young Alabama ambiguously remarks that she "will all come to pieces long before" she arrives at a social; she could of course be referring to the disintegration of her polished appearance, but she does not specify. Moments later, when her father teases her for gazing in the mirror too often, Alabama reflects why she does so. It is not vanity—rather, "she looked

more frequently than her satisfaction in her appearance justified in the hope of finding something more than she expected” (27). She expects herself to go to pieces, and she wants to be and see something more in herself. These are the thoughts of a dissatisfied and confused adolescent, but Alabama never seems to come of age in a way that solves the issue of her incoherence. Alabama’s distance from the scattered pieces of herself is reiterated later in the novel, when she sees herself in the studio mirror not as a dancer, indeed not as a person. Instead, she sees herself as cuts of meat, as sinew, but never as a singular entity. As previously mentioned, Alabama’s lessons are painful and disconcerting in their effect on her views of her body: “she worked till she felt like a gored horse in the bull ring, dragging its entrails” (154). This grotesque imagery serves to show the ways in which she is unbecoming. She sees herself as something unlike herself, and then seeks to unravel it, here in the very literal unfolding and expelling of intestines.

Though Alabama seeks agency throughout the novel, she seems to like that her body is uncontainable and outside of her ownership. Her body is of little interest to her unless it can be classed as a legible aesthetic object. Trying on a dress for a dance, she evaluates its fit by imagining “how it would have looked in a museum on the ‘Venus de Milo’” rather than simply looking at herself in the mirror (27). David Knight, Alabama’s husband and an artist, tells her that she has “become nothing but an aesthetic theory- a chemistry formula for the decorative” (Fitzgerald 48). Though it is her painter husband who produces artwork, she seems to embody art and beauty; she is a work of art. Alabama admits that she is not truly herself, but instead a creation of “pure fiction” (Fitzgerald 70). Looking at herself in a new dress, she remarks, ““The feet look as if they

were somebody else's'" (18). Significantly, she doesn't even use the possessive here—she says “the feet” instead of “my feet.” Even more bizarrely is the attention on her feet in the first place, when she is ostensibly complaining about the dress's length as she begs her mother to shorten the skirt. In the previous paragraph, her fingers trace the breast pocket and the collar, but none of this has anything to do with her actual body and certainly not with her feet. Her attention is pulled everywhere across the length of her body, as if she hardly knows the difference between her feet, her chest, and the ankles and calves she wants to display. Sizing up her body is a disorienting experience because she cannot view it as being hers.

Alabama is continually robbed of her autonomy and ability to choose. While Alabama does appear to achieve artistic freedom, in the end she remains in her oppressive marriage. An infection in her foot ends her dancing career, and David's only response is, “but it has brought us together again” (195). He shows not even a cursory interest in her dancing career or the implications of her injury for her future happiness. The novel suggests that the stability of the family structure comes at the cost of artistic achievement and autonomy (and vice versa). Alabama's triumph as an artist is incompatible with fulfillment in the role of wife and mother. More importantly, this means that for the woman who does not desire a traditional gender role, she can only ever fail miserably.

Life in the public sphere is not a feasible option for achieving meaningful identity for Alabama and other women of her class and generation, and so Alabama seizes the opportunities allowed by public failure. Furthermore, the novel shows us that her failure is predetermined to a certain extent. Her husband won't allow her any freedom, and her

fellow dancers cannot understand why a married woman without need of a patron would be interested in ballet. Even if Alabama were to find great success and public acclaim as a ballerina, that success would be a *personal* failure, for it would mean that she would become a publicly consumable art object. Agency is circumscribed no matter which path Alabama chooses. And significantly, this restriction insinuates that Alabama has no real choices at all.

The illusion of choice is just one way in which Alabama's trajectory as emerging artist goes awry. Her husband's insistence on treating her as his "poor wingless child" and his "possession" thwarts her attempts at success in public as an artist (Fitzgerald 68). In the presence of David, who wishes to place her firmly in the private sphere, Alabama finds herself unable to fly. Alabama's artistic journey destroys her and keeps her in a domestic sphere against her will, ultimately suggesting that opportunities for personal growth and advancement are severely limited by familial attachments.

Shadow feminism argues for purposeful failure, a negation that paradoxically produces something. What Fitzgerald shows us is that failure is almost always the only option presented to a woman chafing against gender norms. To fail spectacularly, though, is to achieve some modicum of success. At the novel's close, David chastises Alabama for cleaning up at the end of a party—specifically, he objects to the way she dumps out the ash trays before their guests are out the door. She does not apologize for hewing to the gendered work of cleaning or for deviating from her role a bit by being slightly less than warmly hospitable. Instead, she asserts her choice to clear the ash trays and makes a bold claim about what that choice represents. "It's very expressive of myself," she says. "I just lump everything in a great heap which I have labelled [sic]



‘the past,’ and, having thus emptied this deep reservoir that was once myself, I am ready to continue” (212). Only by unmaking herself is she able to make herself. In other words, to be Alabama, a woman and an artist, is to engage in a continual process of unraveling oneself. In the figure of Alabama Beggs, Fitzgerald exposes public sphere femininity as a sham—to be legible in the public eye is to give oneself over, but public failure can be a means of experiencing selfhood. Alabama’s illegibility allows her some freedom over her body and over her self-representation and expression. This novel shows us that public sphere femininity holds no promise. Public failure is the best Alabama can hope for, making *Save Me the Waltz* a cruel parody of a *künstlerroman* — perhaps even a failed one.

## CHAPTER 5

### MOBILITY AND THE HOME: REDEFINING DOMESTIC SPACES IN DAWN POWELL'S *ANGELS ON TOAST*

Dawn Powell's *Angels on Toast* is a novel that refuses to settle down. Its characters are rarely stationary for long, and its settings whip back and forth across the country. It is an overlooked novel from an equally overlooked author, and whiplash is as good an explanation as any. Gore Vidal, a friend and champion of Powell's, finds her lack of celebrity especially confusing because it seemed so often within her reach. "For decades Dawn Powell was always just on the verge of ceasing to be a cult and becoming a major religion," he claims, citing her friendships with Edmund Wilson, Hemingway, and Dos Passos as signs that should have pointed her to wide readership and enduring popularity. Vidal argues that Powell "needs no interpretation," and this readability has kept her out of the hands of discerning readers as well as out of the classroom (Vidal, n.p.). Anne T. Keene remarks that to call Powell a "forgotten writer," as critics often do, is not quite accurate, since she never found a large readership in the first place. Keene suggests that Powell was more than contemporary readers could handle, as her "characteristic satiric tone, mordant wit, and unforgiving eye for the foibles of middle-class Americans" situated many potential readers as a target (232). In the *New York Times* review of *Angels of Toast*, the critic complains that the characters "are pretty hopeless because nothing much worth hoping for ever caught their attention" (Van Gelder 6). He concludes his assessment with the dismissive note that the book "is amusing but formless

and inconclusive” (Van Gelder 6). Reflecting on possible reasons for Powell’s low sales and general unpopularity, Edmund Wilson suggests that Powell’s lack of feminine feeling is partially to blame: “she does nothing to stimulate feminine daydreams. The woman reader can find no comfort in identifying herself with Miss Powell’s heroines. The women who appear in her stories are likely to be as sordid and absurd as the men” (Wilson 526). Ebie Vane of *Angels on Toast* is certainly every bit as “sordid and absurd” as the men in the novel, if her attraction to business negotiations and her apathetic interest in a love affair can be called “sordid and absurd.” All of these assessments of Powell’s work assert one idea: her fiction is simply not *enough*. It is not formally innovative enough to attract the attention of scholars, teachers, or her contemporaries; it is not kind enough to its reader to promote further reading; it is not substantial enough; it is not cheerily romantic enough. It seems odd that Powell’s work should be taken to task for any kind of deficiency when *Angels on Toast* seems to have an excess of options in characters to follow, places to visit, and potential choices for its three busy protagonists. It is this madcap busy-ness, however, that leads the novel away from anything resembling a love plot or a satisfying ending for its characters.

Like the other writers I have discussed, Powell writes of love and relationships in a decidedly unromantic way. Characters engage in a compulsory heterosexuality, getting married and carrying on affairs because it is what one does, but the relationships in and of themselves are not fulfilling. No one in *Angels on Toast* seems content in their various domestic arrangements. Marriages are generally unhappy in Powell’s work. *Turn, Magic Wheel* shows a woman hung up on her bombastic ex-husband, for example, and *Come Back to Sorrento* follows a bored wife’s emotional affair with music...and with her

small town's music teacher. Though Powell's work has hints of romance, she does not allow a happily ever after for her characters. Rather, her themes indicate that to do so would be disingenuous—what's so idyllic about a house and family anyway? The trio at the heart of *Angels on Toast*—Ebie, Jay, and Lou—provide no compelling answers. This refusal to adhere to a model of domestic bliss is distinctively Powell. Wilson claims that in Powell's fiction, "there are no love scenes that will rouse you or melt you," apparently a requirement for women's writing at the time (Wilson 526). Vidal continues Wilson's line of thinking: "Powell was that unthinkable monster, a witty woman who felt no obligation to make a single, much less a final, down payment on Love or The Family," and this resulted in novels which were "a marvelous sharp antidote for the deep-warm-sincere love novels of that period" (Vidal n.p.). This antidote attacks the system in numerous ways. While relying on quick wit and movement, *Angels on Toast* skewers domesticity and middle-class aspiration by offering a variety of alternate home spaces and redefining the boundary between public and private. By showing us that home is not the private, personal retreat it claims to be, the novel effectively calls out the happy hearth as a myth. Domesticity, as presented in the novel, is every bit as constructed as a magazine advertisement. In short, it's a sham.

The novel follows the madcap maneuvers of three people as they find success and failure in business: Jay Oliver, Lou Donovan, and Ebie Vane (Jay's mistress). Lou attempts to create "Castles-in-the-Woods," a luxury resort, in collaboration with Jay's linen business. The "Castles-in-the-Woods" plot is only the framework for a story that is ultimately about relationships between men and women and the effect of the rat race on those relationships. Though it is arguably a novel about two scheming businessmen, Ebie

receives careful attention and chapters devoted solely to her. The focus of the novel continually shifts to Ebie and her relation to Lou, Jay, and the commercial world. The novel treats both the public and private spheres with humor, mocking professionalism and domesticity equally.

Though the characters are all brought together via the resort scheme, the novel is obsessed with homes. Lou notes that there is something special about how a woman's home sets off her looks and personality to greatest advantage. "Lots of women look better in their own places," including Ebie (Powell 575). Ebie's mother pontificates on the importance of "what a house means" (613) and arguably Castle-in-the-Woods is one enormous domestic project for Jay and Lou. Domesticity and the impossibility of doing it well while having some mobility in the public sphere is a theme that crops up throughout the novel. This negative portrayal of modern domesticity is largely due to the conflation of the domestic and the commercial that occurs throughout the novel. I would like to show how Ebie Vane's (and Dawn Powell's) fluency and intimacy with the middlebrow enables her to lambast it more effectively.

The term "middlebrow" popped up sometime after 1920, though the concepts for high-brow and low-brow existed for a few decades earlier (Radway 218-219). "The space of the middlebrow," Janice Radway explains, "was occupied by products that supposedly hid the same machine-tooled uniformity behind the self-consciously worked mask of culture" (222). Ebie's middlebrow work as a commercial artist shows that if anything is being hidden, it's the skills and desires implied in highbrow artistic creation. However clichéd or formulaic a middlebrow product, the mass-produced element of it is the last step of production before reaching the consumer. Mechanical production does

not spring from the gears themselves—what is produced by a machine that runs itself? Ebie must design and sketch, and the author must write *something*. This undervalued and unnoticed step in the growth of mass market culture negates the contributions of artists, writers, and designers.

Ebie knows that her commercial work is perceived as mundane, and her highbrow desires and affiliations drive this point home for her. She is smart enough to know when her work caters to a middlebrow crowd, and smart enough to know she can't hack it as a fine "Artist." Even Powell had to walk that line, writing puff pieces for women's magazines that were perhaps not up to her standards or reflective of her personality but were necessary for survival. This self-awareness of one's middlebrow-ness and defiant disregard of the limits of that positioning are key to Ebie's character. Throughout the novel, instead of being hampered by identification with the middlebrow, Ebie gives it a simultaneous embrace and shove-off. Radway explains that "the scandal of the middlebrow was a function of its failure to maintain the fences cordoning off culture from commerce, the sacred from the profane, and the low from the high" (Radway 152). For example, it was possible to detest or be perplexed by the highbrow and still consume it like a vitamin for one's betterment. The middlebrow offered accessible and undemanding culture, much to the dismay of tastemakers and the cultural elite.

At one point, exhausted by the tension she feels between highbrow and middlebrow production, Ebie laments that highbrow art and culture are just like "too much spinach" (Powell 599). "That was what art and culture finally rattled down to—too much spinach, take it all and say you like it, or else throw your weight with people like Lou Donovan and Jay Oliver who made fun of culture because they didn't have any," she

asserts (599). In one fell swoop, Ebie criticizes both art and business while also managing to berate herself for her own choices. Being culturally conversant is certainly good and fortifying, yet it is always “too much.” On the other hand, choosing commerce means keeping company with dismissive fools. This all-or-nothing attitude peeves Ebie, whose dissatisfaction is the driving force behind her movements between city and country and the worlds of art and business.

Ebie’s spinach metaphor aligns with turn-of-the-century debates about the value of highbrow and lowbrow literature. Radway cites a critical article in which the author decries affordable books as “accessible as milk” and “as compulsory as spinach” (211). The issue with this criticism of middlebrow reading is twofold: 1) it presumes that the middlebrow book is fundamentally different by virtue of mixing high and low, instead of assuming that attributes of both high and low might shine through, and 2) it treats the reader as the hoodwinked child, unknowingly ingesting vegetables against his wishes. Lou would seem to play the role of that child, but he’s too clever for it—he rejects high culture whichever way it’s dressed up. When his upper-crust wife decides to accompany him on a raucous party, he isn’t swept up by the possibilities or tricked into excitement—he sees the zucchini in the cake, and it repulses him. The mingling of high and low does not make either indistinguishable for Lou; rather, it highlights their differences and incompatibility. Apparently the association of accessible literature with nutritious food was relatively common in the first part of the twentieth century: Radway finds that in discussions of book clubs, “usually compared either to nonnourishing food or to food considered particularly distasteful, mass-produced culture was [...] demonized by its metonymic association with those who would force-feed such food to their docile

charges, that is, with women” (Radway 210). Powell flips this argument on its head by making Lou and Jay the mass-culture cooks spooning faux castles into the mouths of eager consumers. Ebie, on the other hand, is capable of inhabiting the middlebrow in her position as a commercial artist. However, she is ambivalent about work and misses her days as a Bohemian artist, even while remaining critical of highbrow “spinach.”

At issue in the novel is whether any of the characters are capable of rising above their social station. Ebie appears to have already done so by the novel’s opening: we learn she overcame middle-class, Midwestern roots to be a self-sufficient woman in the city. However, Powell reveals that Ebie has deep insecurities about her choice to become a commercial artist. Jay and Lou are forever scheming to get rich and live fabulously outside their means (and marriages). It is not clear if any of them are capable of the upper-class sophistication to which they aspire. Faye Hammill surmises that even while sophistication “can only be recognized by someone who already possesses it,” the definition of sophistication belies its constructed nature. The sophisticated person “would usually be imagined as educated, culturally aware, fashionable and self-conscious, and all of these things require deliberate effort,” Hammill notes, indicating that the supposedly ineffable quality of sophistication is actually precisely delineated and within reach (3). Hammill claims that in literature the sophisticate can be any or all of the following: hedonist, unconventional, self-absorbed, extravagant, and sexually adventurous. Most importantly, sophisticated characters are diametrically opposed to the norm (Hammill 4). Jay and Lou will never be sophisticates, since ascending to that status requires letting go of normative attitudes. Their lack of cultural knowledge and Lou’s



old-fashioned strategy of climbing the social ladder by marriage mark the two men as far too mundane to be sophisticated.

The novel itself is sophisticated, however, and positions itself against social norms by featuring an explicit disavowal of traditional values. Ebie and a young hairdresser engage in a conversation that shocks Mrs. Vane—the “snip” mentions moving in with her boyfriend. Mrs. Vane attempts to glare at her, but “it was too much with the firm hands now holding her head in a vise” (Powell 630). The young woman’s grip signifies her metaphorical grasp on the future, one in which she may keep her job, choose not to marry, and cohabit with a man. These choices echo Ebie’s current confusion over whether or not to take the country house in Connecticut. Ebie interjects with a “leave her alone” and a “times are different,” much to Mrs. Vane’s dismay.

Times *were* different, largely because the domestic ideal eschewed by Mrs. Vane’s hairdresser no longer exists. Elizabeth Outka argues that a fusion of artifice and authenticity arose in the twentieth century, and analyzing it can tell us about mass culture/commodity culture as well as modernism. Of the “commodified authentic,” Outka writes “their noncommercial aura made them appealing; their underlying commercial availability promised to make the simulations better than the original, for these new hybrids were accessible, controllable, and—in their ability to unite seemingly antithetical desires—tantalizingly modern” (4). She refers to the popularity of the shabby chic aesthetic, the allure of Disneyworld’s Main Street U.S.A., and the homey simplicity—available at a reasonable price—of “the fireside scene of the L. L. Bean Christmas catalog, with its golden retriever puppies reclining on soft flannel” (4). Her term “commodified authentic” suggests “a search for a sustained contradiction that might

allow consumers to be at once connected to a range of values roughly aligned with authenticity and yet also to be fully modern” (4), the best of both worlds, as it were. Ebie desperately wants this with her country home—the charm of the farmhouse, but none of the work, and only if she can move in with her modern sensibilities and visiting lover. Though Outka’s argument tackles late nineteenth and early twentieth British culture specifically, her ideas are right at home in Powell’s 1940 American novel. The desire to reproduce the intangible, to make the old new without sacrificing its oldness, and to profit off it all, is central to *Angels on Toast*. Outka argues that the commodified authentic “also worked to soothe the friction between an often elitist desire to escape the marketplace and a contradictory but powerful appetite for its spectacular bounty” (Outka 7). This friction plays out in the novel as Ebie’s desire to orbit the Bohemian arts scene while being financially secure. She wants one foot in the commercial realm and one foot out.

Marjorie Garber’s exploration of real estate critiques the commodity culture that informs how we select, purchase, and decorate our homes, making them more into public showplaces than private retreats. “The quest for the perfect dream house,” she claims, is an attempt “to substitute space for time,” which we have so little of (5). This strikes a familiar chord, as Lou and Jay’s busy itineraries (whether due to business affairs or the extra-marital variety) leave them with few minutes to spare, yet they seem obsessed with constructing the perfect second home. Their doomed resort is an example of having rather than doing—booking the stay at the General’s estate suggests familiarity without actually having any such connection. And, later, Ebie has the shabby country home but does nothing with it, despite her mother’s dreams of turning it into an antique shop/tea

room. Garber argues that with our real estate obsession, we are constantly having instead of doing: “we build exercise rooms instead of exercising, furnish libraries instead of reading, install professional kitchens instead of cooking” (5). The homes (or resorts) certainly look better for it, but the people inside are stagnant.

Ebie’s house-hunger allows her to displace her desire for love onto a new house. By choosing the Connecticut house, she is indicating her commitment to Jay, who remains married. Garber notes that the allure of property listings is that they are both “descriptive and seductive,” selling not just a home “but a relationship” (Garber 6). In the same way, the fantasy of the fixer-upper encourages the buyer to engage in some sacrifice in order to have a personal, meaningful connection. The lure of the fixer-upper extends to human relationships, too: the novel follows Ebie’s attempts not just to fix the suburban home and Jay, but herself.

The novel presents a series of alternative home spaces that show an overlap between home and public, which prompts the reader to reconsider what might constitute a home. Home is *not* where the heart is for Powell’s characters, but rather what advertising ideas are made of. This is dramatized by Ebie’s skepticism when she spies a man pushing a pram down the street; she surmises it could be either a father and baby or, just as plausibly, a publicity stunt (Powell 602). The home, as well as the relationships that gird it, are products being marketed, and the line between public and private has all but vanished. The domestic sphere, untouched by crass commercialism, does not exist. Home is a place that is artificially constructed, and Powell charts this process in Ebie’s multiple attempts at making a home for herself and in Jay and Lou’s disastrous Castles-

in-the-Woods resort. Castles-in-the-Woods conflates domesticity and the private sphere with commercialism, ultimately showing that both offer empty promises.

The Castles project is designed to evoke delusions of grandeur for each visitor, to the extent that everyone should feel like the “personal guest” of the primary investor, the mysterious Major, rather than an ordinary hotel patron (581). All of the linens (provided by Jay’s company, Whittleby Cotton) will bear the Major’s crest, adding a personal flourish. Castles, for Lou, should operate as a sort of ideal home for its visitors, a perfect simulation of upper-class living. A chief selling point would be thirty stand-alone homes ringing the hotel property, allowing the possibility to “be a millionaire for a week-end,” as Lou explains to Jay (581). This elaborate set-up for a hotel falls in line with Alice Tufel’s claim that Powell’s novels are obsessed with fantasy: “in novel after novel, her characters exist on some level through their fantasies of another kind of life” (Tufel 155). This is certainly evident in Jay and Lou’s ambitions to be seen as upper-class and their desire to share that goal with future Castles guests. Jay and Lou will only ever be middle class businessmen on the make, however, and the grandiosity of the Castles scheme almost guarantees it will be a failure. Jay and Lou’s inability to see past their desires sets them apart from Ebie, the only reflective character in the noel. Tufel asserts that “Powell’s great theme is the way human beings delude themselves, and her novels chronicle the struggle between the impulse to create a fantasy and the need to face reality” (Tufel 160). Denying the truth only leads to heartbreak and failure for her characters and, one may extrapolate, to the type of middle class people she portrays. A feeling of home is thus constructed on lies—about who the guests are (on friendly terms

with the Major, of a different social strata) and about where home is (a real house, a rental mansion serviced by a resort, etc.).

Home in the novel is unstable as a concept, but it is also not fixed in its location. This is evident Jay and Lou's assessment of the Castles resort property, which they will not allow to be defined by its location. Jay openly derides the state of Maryland, and even Lou criticizes the location in his defense of it, boasting, "wait till the natives see what we make of that state" (Powell 581). Even while Lou explains the importance of a good neighborhood and good roads in selecting a hotel site (592), he also admits that ideally a guest would fly in and be driven straight to it without stopping to notice the surrounds (581). To Lou and Jay, location is apparently of little concern when constructing a sense of home, and love and family also have no bearing on domestic bliss. When Lou and Ebie spend time together sans Jay, Lou enjoys her company immensely. He finds something "homelike" and comforting in their lack of chemistry (Powell 574). For Lou, an absence of attraction signifies home. This is an echo of his wife's earlier accusation that Lou prefers being away from his Chicago home (560). Likewise, Jay asserts that love and family should remain distinctly separate. When Lou suggests Jay marry Ebie, Jay is "visibly shocked," proclaiming, "you can't marry a woman that makes love as well as Ebie" (Powell 565).

Ebie Vane, too, must confront the question of what is home. Though Lou and Jay seek to construct a grand vision of home-away-from-home with their Castles-in-the-Woods plan, Ebie wants merely to reclaim her apartment from her roommate, Trina Kameray. Ebie simply hates Trina, despite reason. "All during Mrs. Kameray's stay she had waked up, at first irritated and finally furious at the mere sound of somebody

breathing in the next room” (Powell 594). The thought of Trina in the shower, brewing coffee, and just existing in Ebie’s personal space drives her to distraction. For Ebie, home is something that belongs to someone, and it cannot be shared. “What was hers was hers,” Ebie admits, and this thinking sets her apart from Lou and Jay who seem to want to own nothing but their own ability to move from place to place and transaction to transaction (594).

Ebie’s rejection of domesticity is not rooted in its incompatibility with professionalism; she simply sees that she has other options. Ebie enjoys the freedom of choice, which sets her apart from the other women artists I have discussed. However, her choice also leads her to become metaphorically homeless—she is too commercially successful and middlebrow to belong to the bohemian crowd, and her apartment is more of a studio than a home. Even as Ebie jealously guards her home as her private retreat, she also treats it as a work space. She finds that a lack of decorative flourishes in her home sets her up for a better attack on the day’s work. For this reason, her bedroom lacks the luxurious trappings of her living area. “She couldn’t quite explain this but if you waked up to bare walls, uncurtained windows, Venetian shades of course but no drapes, you could map out the day’s work with no interfering images” (Powell 598). Minimalism at home leads to better working conditions, and this is especially important as Ebie’s work space is located one door over in what had been serving as Trina’s bedroom. The conflict between domesticity and commercialism looks very different for Ebie—her apartment is the battleground, as she must find physical and mental space to work and live there.

Furnishing a home/studio has already proved too difficult for Ebie once before. As a young art student, her delightfully dingy abode “was so romantically Bohemian, so much the artist’s dream, that Ebie did less and less serious art [there] and more and more discussion of it” (Powell 606). Her home allowed her to pretend to be the Bohemian so convincingly, with her older sketches on the walls, she was not motivated to create any more. The apartment was outfitted so perfectly, it was impossible for Ebie to actually make art there for to do so would mean making that ideal presentation of Bohemianism untidy, disrupting the simulation of a slightly slovenly artist’s life she wanted so desperately to cultivate.

This conflict between being and seeming is a recurring issue for Ebie. Her outsider status as a female commercial artist allows her accessibility and freedom in public spaces; Ebie is free to move between and among these different groups and social strata because of her unrootedness. Ebie represents a new path for women artists. Unlike her fictional forebears, she is not anchored by familial responsibilities, nor does she desire a supportive community. Ebie’s chief concern is how to navigate a love affair and a business connection, and her nonchalance regarding both is a striking difference from the passionate struggles of Yeziarska’s and Fitzgerald’s heroines.

In *Angels on Toast*, Ebie tries to exist in multiple worlds, but finds that “both/and” is a miserable alternative to forging a new path. Similar to Ebie, Powell’s life overlapped artistic and commercial circles. From her address in the Village, she wrote both commercially unsuccessful novels and more lucrative short pieces, socializing with literary giants and bohemians while married to an ad man. According to Catherine Keyser, “Powell lived uncomfortably between two literary, cultural, and even

geographical worlds” and this position allowed her the unique ability to see the connections between these worlds (Keyser 112). Rather than sticking it out in the city and taking advantage of its fluid boundaries, however, Ebie decides to try her hand once more at constructing home.

When she feels like her relationship with Jay, a married man, has grown stale, and her work with advertising stalls, Ebie blames city life and decides to give idyllic country life a shot. Playing homemaker in the country does not appear to be a good fit for her either, as she is in a position of constantly waiting for Jay to arrive. Barbara Levy asserts that “Powell does not seem able to visualize a positive option for her characters. Her women can choose small towns and male dominance or the big city and survival masks. The latter is presented as the lesser of two evils rather than as a positive good” (Levy 25). Ebie appears to suffer from this choice. Her conspicuous absence in the middle of the book as she settles into her rustic Connecticut house is also her absence from the public, commercial world. Ebie, however, does not feel as if her choice is irreversible. Her ideas about home are fluid. Ebie reflects that “the New Yorker’s only haven was home,” yet her apartment has been fitted with a work room (596). Amid the luxurious furnishings, Ebie scatters the tools of her trade: a drawing table and easel share a room with a grand piano (Powell 575). Nicola Humble writes that the home is “in the process of disintegration in the feminine middlebrow” in the twentieth century (109). Ebie’s failure at defining a rigidly private home sphere, and her surprising satisfaction with it when compared to the potentially cozy country retreat, reveals the ways in which Ebie can move effortlessly from one sphere to another.



Ebie's attempt at country living is an even greater failure at domesticity. In her analysis of magazine advertisements of the 1920s and 1930s, Humble notes the overall message is that "domestic labour is high status and fashionable," so it would make sense that having achieved a modicum of economic success, Ebie would want to do the next popular thing (Humble 126). When she announces her intention to give domestic bliss a try, her mother is befuddled. Though Ebie claims she moves to Connecticut because she is "fed up with New York" and wants nothing more than a place to call home, her desire for domesticity is seen as wildly out-of-character. Her mother insists that using the house as a tea room and antiques shop would be much more lucrative than merely living there (Powell 631). But Mrs. Vane's penchant for buying old junk has been a running joke throughout the novel at this point, and it is clear that collecting home furnishings, even if one has an eye for home décor, is not a money-making venture. Mrs. Vane's version of domesticity is stuffing her rental units with her antique junk and otherwise being a negligent landlady. Mrs. Vane's attempts to furnish and fix are total failures, as is Castle-in-the-Woods. Monetizing domesticity is deemed impossible in this novel, for home-making and money-making are antithetical activities. Yet, the making of the home requires making money—whether Ebie is working to afford her Manhattan apartment, or Jay and Lou seeking an investor for their home-away-from-home resort. The commercial and the domestic are completely enmeshed, and the collision wreaks havoc on everyone. As Ebie discovers, the commercial artist cannot also succeed in the domestic sphere, nor can she advance in the artistic community. Yet there is a freedom in this lack of belonging. Ebie has the ability to move from one sphere to another, and this affords her a status that other women in the novel cannot reach.

Movement is the one constant of the novel. In a letter to editor Max Perkins, dated August 1 of 1940, Powell explains, “I wanted to convey the sense of speed, changing geography with no change in the conversation, the sense of pressure behind the ever-evanescent big deal, and behind these adventurers, their women” (*Letters* 110). Critics have noticed Powell’s emphasis on speed and movement in the novel. Powell’s biographer Tim Page argues that *Angels on Toast* “has very little plot, the characters are unusually hard, and the tone is rather clipped and cold,” musing that Powell’s hasty writing schedule and dependence on prescription drugs were perhaps the cause (173). However, when compared to *The Happy Island*, written just previously to *Angels on Toast*, Page finds it “tighter, faster, funnier, more linear, and altogether more engaging” (173). He highlights Powell’s emphasis on motion—Jay and Lou talk fast and move faster, always moving rapidly from woman to woman, from deal to deal, and often doing so with the aid of a chugging train. The novel has no one setting, though the action revolves around New York City for the most part. The novel is set between places—New York, Chicago, even a brief foray to Cuba—and does not settle in one locale for too long, “instead relishing the movement from one area to another” (Rice 128). Marcelle Smith Rice argues that “the cities themselves become vehicles. They are not as important as the movement between them” (Rice 129).

From her diaries at the time of writing *Angels on Toast*, it is clear that movement and mobility in public places were always meant to serve as the unifying theme of the novel. On September 29, 1938, her journal entry reads: “In the new book, I propose another provincial angle—the businessman on planes, trains, buses, private cars, whose business axis is New York; whose homes are Iowa, Chicago, Detroit, Pittsburgh,

Alabama. These men have their wandering minstrel, gypsy lives, in and out of hotels” (*Diaries* 151). The businessmen she describes here are identified by their mobility—it is their most important quality, apparently, since she leads with it. Though the eventual novel would feature Jay and Lou zipping around from place to place, the novel remains a firmly New York tale—largely due to Ebie’s identification with the city even when she desires to leave it. Ebie’s inability to stay put in one place is mirrored in her personality. She defies categorization. As seen through Lou’s eyes, “Ebie was a girl who changed at every appearance from pretty to chic to naïve to plain tart” (Powell 575). Ebie’s ability to move from public to private spaces paradoxically grounds her, allowing a freedom that her constantly on-the-move male counterparts lack. Though Jay and Lou are constantly between cities and rooms, they remain trapped by their work and women (though “trapped” is admittedly a misleading term—both men make decisions willingly that lead to their own entrapment).

Ebie, by opting out of the provincial (here indicated as moderate success and a marriage) and into the bohemian/urban, gets to be part of the axis around which these men spin. By making unconventional choices, Ebie is at the center of the universe. Her work as a commercial artist straddles the line between industry and art, and her status as a self-sufficient working woman sets her apart from the unsympathetic wives in the novel even while she herself considers being Jay’s “kept” mistress.

It is clear from the moment we meet Ebie that she is unlike the other women in the world of the novel. Of Ebie, Page writes, she “is among the brightest and most self-aware of Powell’s heroines” (Page 174). We meet her and her lover, Jay, at a train station where both are surprised by the arrival of Jay’s wife and mother-in-law. Jay’s

friend Lou saves the day by pretending that Ebie is *his* mistress. Though everyone is shaken up, Lou is relieved that rather than display “a little womanly hysteria,” as one might expect, Ebie easily collects herself (Powell 572). This quick juxtaposition of the jealous wife, eager to catch her husband with his mistress, with the blasé attitude of the mistress herself, sets up our understanding of Ebie as different from (and perhaps even indifferent to) the other women characters in the novel. Her choice of calmness in lieu of hysteria (itself a gendered term) is our first indication that Ebie’s performance of femininity will be unique and significant in how she navigates the plots unfolding around her.

Ebie’s outward display of wealth and success is an important component of her unique brand of femininity. Ebie continues to befuddle Lou with her posh Park Avenue apartment. The tasteful décor, deference of the doorman, and the appearance of a maid all point to a resident who does well for herself and unabashedly flaunts it (Powell 574-575). Her apartment is a reflection of her public persona, if not her true self. It betrays no hints of her modest Iowa heritage, but instead dazzles Lou with its lushness. As noted earlier, Lou finds that seeing Ebie in the context of her apartment makes her appear more attractive, and this observation aligns with Humble’s argument that the nature of the home was changing in the mid-twentieth century: “the home is constructed in this period in a relation to the outside world that is simultaneously anxious and exhibitionist” (109). Her apartment is a direct reflection of her successful career as a commercial artist. “A more direct association with the bohemian creative artist is offered to the middle-class woman through the activity of house-decoration,” claims Humble (143). Though Ebie

has given up her Village connections and dreams of being a fine artist, she can access that world via her choices in home décor.

Despite being independent and successful, Ebie remains haunted by the promise of a dream she cannot realize as a working commercial artist. Ebie's reflections on this choice oppose being a success with being an artist—for her, it is an either/or situation. In choosing “the commercial game,” Ebie must divorce herself from “the old artistic crowd” and the intellectual life of Greenwich Village (596). As Ebie explains, women must be “above-reproach” if they are to be bohemian— “a good address” and family is imperative, lest she be branded loose (597). Since Ebie is a middle-class transplant from Iowa, being a bohemian without courting scandal is not an option. Though she experiences some regret from giving up the life of the “real artist” (Powell 600), she also notes that many of her old artist friends lack the talent to do what she does. She reflects that “her gift for prostituting her art had always made those old companions strangely jealous” (Powell 600), and she often grew tired of them “decrying the advertising art she was making a living at and incidentally which they couldn't do” (596). Ebie tarnishes the elitism of her former companions by pointing out that her ability exceeds theirs. Furthermore, Ebie uses gendered terms in order to contradict their elitism. In the next line, she refers to those “soon-to-be-great painters” as mere “boys” who relied on her hospitality and cooking (596). Ebie feels torn between the merits of Bohemianism (which she conflates with artistic integrity) and her choice to “sell out” as a commercial artist. “The more commercial work she did the more of her old studies did she pin up with pride, and the more money she made the more she enjoyed the company of the arty boys and girls” (Powell 606). The reason Ebie cannot do both commercial and non-

commercial work or enjoy the company of fellow artists as easily while broke is this: art is qualified as antithetical to success throughout the novel. She cannot be happy or successful while also being a fine artist. Ebie “sets out to be a success *instead of* an artist,” and Lou initially dismisses her as a “tramp” because she is an artist (598, 564, emphasis mine). Art and artistry are not valued in any meaningful way by any of the characters, even Ebie, who often wonders what might have been had she stayed in Greenwich Village instead of going commercial.

Unlike Ebie, who understands that value can be assessed in other ways, Jay and Lou think only of cost. Everything has a monetary value, and Jay and Lou believe that price conveys value. Vidal asserts that “money is always a character in [Powell’s] novels,” and here it plays the role of Jay and Lou’s favorite celebrity. The novel’s opening scene has Jay and Lou comparing the quality and style of their clothing, each man stating the price he paid for his most exceptional item-- \$4.50 for Jay’s “sleek” socks and \$18 for Lou’s pink shirt. Opening the novel with such mundane details may seem an odd choice for such a fast-paced story, but it points to Powell’s dry humor. These men, despite their self-perceived importance as businessmen and their misplaced confidence as men-on-the-make, routinely have nothing better to do than eat, drink, and talk about frivolities. Their interest in each other’s stylish new clothes takes the place of any interest in the world around them—they do not talk politics or art—and their inclusion of prices in their discussion debases them even further. Though Lou and Jay aspire to upper-crust living, it is made clear in this introduction that they lack the intelligence, class fluency, and financial comfort required to make the leap from the middle-class.

Lou's unfitness for class mobility is reiterated in his strained relationship with his wife's family, the Harrods. Lou clearly loves his connection to the old money Harrods, but in truth they will have little to do with him, and vice versa. Lou likes the idea of attending their dinners and concerts for the image it would impart to his customers; he dreams of "governors, bank presidents, bishops, all hanging on to [his] sound analysis of business conditions." Business chat is not compatible with art and music, however. "If such pictures could have been distributed without the actual boredom of listening to an evening of musical baloney or highbrow chit-chat, Lou would have been quite happy" (Powell 566). So the Harrods, after "nothing but embarrassment on all sides," cease inviting Lou to these events and he remains cut off from the upper class connections his marriage would otherwise afford him. Lou wants the connections of the highbrow without the cultural requirements. This is the inverse of Ebie's situation—she often longs for the social aspect and the legitimacy associated with the lifestyle of the impoverished Bohemian artist. However, Ebie is unwilling to slum it in the Village.

Stifling her creativity is the price Ebie pays for her comfortable lifestyle, but she finds that material things, even when amply provided, are not fulfilling. After settling the Castles-in-the-Woods deal, Jay and Lou take Ebie and Trina out to dinner and suggest steak. "'A steak for God's sake,' she had mocked. 'These two bums clean up a fortune today and they can't think of anything better than a steak to buy for us'" (Powell 599). Her jibe results in Lou and Jay offering up the nonsensical order of "angels on toast," which further illustrates their inability to think creatively or match Ebie's wit. "Angels on toast" refers to nothing, results in no change to their plans, and, most importantly, ignores the humor in Ebie's initial remark. Ebie criticized Jay and Lou, not the idea of a

steak dinner, which would be entirely suitable for a pricey and celebratory meal. The disconnect between the men and Ebie is nowhere clearer than this moment. Their failure to understand each other is directly linked to Ebie's wit and creative thinking and Jay and Lou's inability to engage with it though they try.

Powell uses humor to make a clear demarcation between Ebie and the two men. Powell's habit of skewering the middle-class is often pointed to as a reason for her lack of popularity, and Ebie's dry wit certainly does not make life any easier for her, either. Powell was keenly aware of her unique sense of humor and wrote in her personal journals of the difficulties with employing satire: "There are, I have now learned, rigorous rules for wit. Wit is not wit unless directed above or below. There is nothing funny in a property holder. The middle class is wit-proofed" (*Diaries* 180). Though this was written in 1940, the year *Angels on Toast* was published, she does not seem apologetic or reluctant about her choice to wield her wit against types like Jay and Lou. Despite the unpopularity of targeting the middle class, she deems it necessary. In an entry from March 1939, she writes that "wit is the cry of pain, the true word that pierces the heart. If it does not pierce, then it is not true wit. True wit should break a good man's heart" (*Diaries* 157). The pain inherent in wit serves a constructive purpose for Powell. Writing about Powell's *A Time to Be Born*, Keyser notes the ways in which humor can disrupt power structures by upsetting or responding to them (140). She argues that "Powell advocates humor as a corrective tool that can challenge consumer, gender normative, or propagandistic messages," thus creating counterpublics that "can elevate intimacy and irony over estrangement and the status quo by allowing potent revisions of mass media messages and cultural ideals" (Keyser 111). Ebie tries to employ humor in



the above passage as a way to challenge the materialistic lifestyle she has chosen, but her audience is deaf to it.

The promise of angels on toast represents the lack of humor and awareness that marks the middle class and materialistic lifestyle of Jay and Lou. Though comfortable, this lifestyle is not enough to sustain Ebie. The memory of this dinner scene is juxtaposed immediately with Ebie eating an unimpressive breakfast of toast, sausages, and fruit in her luxurious apartment while mourning what might have been had she pursued her career as a fine artist. She eats her hastily assembled breakfast and cries over the arts section of the newspaper, seeing the names of her former associates and feeling conflicted about the choices that have led her to this unassuming breakfast and them to recognition as artists. “Yes she could be among those contemporary immortals instead of here in this elegant apartment, last night’s orchids and tomorrow’s breakfast all on ice, her life a mess,” yet she choose to exploit “her gift of prostituting her art” (Powell 600). Even as she recognizes all that her choices have provided her, choosing material comforts and a modicum of stability has still left her a “mess,” indicating that her outward show of success is no guarantee of actual comfort and fulfillment.

Neither upper class nor starving artist, Ebie is described in terms of juxtaposition and contradiction, and she also thinks of herself this way. Dreaming of her childhood and musing on how she went astray, Ebie dreams of a sweet dotted-swiss dress she wore a child, noting that the only thing like it in her current wardrobe is a slinky kimono (595). Ebie notes that these two items bear very little resemblance to each other, and seems to acknowledge that she was only ever was capable of performing a show of innocence and niceness.

Ebie admits that there is something simple and honest about earning money for her creative work that recalls the pure “dotted-swiss” days of her youth (597). Ebie seems to think of her professional life in terms that evoke home and simplicity, which puts her curiously out of place in the modern workforce. Talking about money is “refreshing” and simply, whereas talking about art is “phony” (Powell 597). This surprising reversal of what might expect—art, not advertising being disingenuous—is one of many of Ebie’s contradictions in describing what she wants out of her life. She seeks career success and financial security specifically because she wants something home-like, something comfortable that belongs to only her. She muses that “maybe you didn’t want a husband or a mother or a father or a child or a dog but you did have to have something. You did really have a right to have something belonging to you, something you could kick around and say, now that, that is definitely mine and nobody’s else’s” (Powell 597). What Ebie wants is not motivated by greed, but by security, “tender, true security, not financial security” (Powell 597).

Ebie is drawn to the commercial and the material because she observes “the futility of love or of art” (600). Her mother’s haunt, the Hotel Ellery Bar and Grill, is where great women wither away—“that famous old suffragette,” “the girl who survived Niagara Falls,” and “the first wives of these now famous men” can all be found idling at the Bar and Grill with a drink and a book as Muzak plays in the background. This scene suggests the shallowness of Ebie’s own career path; her commercial art is analogous to Muzak and to the “slender volume[s]” that serve merely as garnishes to these women’s cocktails. The Ellery scene also insinuates the inevitable decline of a woman who achieves beyond expectations and societal limitations. It is a dreary place, and while

Powell makes Ebie's appearance a stark contrast to these surroundings, the list of former "somebodies" and the foreboding admission that "once in you were in for no mere moment" imply that Ebie might likely find herself a denizen of the Bar and Grill one day, just like her mother (607).

The language of inevitability is found throughout the novel. Ebie considers leaving Manhattan, but instantly feels trapped by the mere idea of a suburban home. Ready to denounce the thought, she nevertheless finds herself roped into it: "Ebie felt weak and as if fate was pushing her into something she had no right to fight" (632). Her mother also voices curiously contradictory thoughts on Ebie's idea. One moment, Mrs. Vane reminds Ebie of the long list of responsibilities of home ownership and children that seem to inevitably come with it, but moments later she is suggesting grand plans for an antique shop and tea room in their future country home. Ebie's mother asks, "'Do you realize what a house means, Ebie?'" (613). The ability to answer this question is the key to Ebie's happiness—knowing explicitly what a house "means" entails letting go of the desire for forcing a domestic arrangement and acknowledging the barriers still in place between the public and private sphere.

Ebie has a wealth of choices before her, but she divides them into two camps: the "simple old life as a real artist" or as a child, and the messy life of a commercial artist (Powell 600). She assigns a spectrum of value to these choices: there is always a purer form of whatever Ebie chooses—a quiet life in Connecticut is the more domestic option when compared to her apartment/studio in the city, and dedicating herself to her art at the expense of being self-sufficient and reasonably financially stable she imagines would involve less guilt and regret than seeking stability and a steady paycheck as a commercial

artist. Furthermore, she is Jay's mistress instead of his wife, and she is keenly aware that this position places her in the margins/makes their relationship tenuous and more or less invisible publicly. She fumes at herself for "distorting all the decent things in life with commercial art, married men, Rainbow Rooms" (600). To be successful and mobile among different groups is to be indecent, a theme that crops up whenever Ebie discusses her relationship to art. Being a commercial artist is prostitution (600) and being a Bohemian is likewise risky without the right class connections (600, 597). Gender performance and class performance are tightly connected here—to be the pure "dotted-Swiss" girl is also to be simple, Midwestern, and middle class. To veer into the realm of art, and to do so in the city, negates purity and niceness—to be a woman artist requires being associated with deviancy. Only upper-class connections can lift the woman artist from squalor and scandal.

Ebie lacks the connections that would enable her to be an artist without a reputation, so she semi-willingly goes commercial. Vidal refers to this abandonment of dreams as "the contentment of failure," found often in Powell's work, as "one of her major themes [is] the failed artist who with luck, might have been—what?" (Vidal, n.p.). Loving art from a distance is somehow more pure than trying and failing at it. Apparently it is better to dream of what might have been rather than compromise one's ideals on the path to success. Ebie Vane struggles with this throughout *Angels on Toast*. Is it better to make a living as a commercial artist or starve as a Bohemian?

*Angels on Toast* charts Ebie's movement among and between all of these positions; she is never stationary, never content to stay still and dedicate herself to one choice. It would seem that Ebie is comfortable only in liminal spaces. Inhabiting the

inbetween isn't freedom, though. Ebie represents a wealth of opportunities for women. Her independence, her earning potential, and her ability to move among different worlds show an abundance of choices for women like her. And yet, Ebie is miserable. The ability to move from place to place may be unique, but it leaves her with no place.

Her chosen homelessness suggests that the only choice for women is a wrong one. No matter Ebie's stability and independence, she, too, falls into the pit of domesticity. James Gibbons argues that Powell's writing is marked by "a hungry embrace of experience combined with a temperamental, ultimately unshakeable pessimism," and it is "this friction of curiosity and pessimism that distinguishes her work" (Gibbons 144). This tension, Gibbons argues, is never resolved, but "what remains constant in all of her works is an insistence on human weakness and folly" (145). By the novel's close, human weakness indeed seems to be the reigning theme. Jay's business is merging with another and likely leaving him unemployed, and Lou is found in the company of his strident ex-wife in the closing chapter. Yet despite their miserable circumstances, they are in more or less the exact same positions in which they began the novel: on a train, comparing the quality of their clothes (Powell 736). The men have learned nothing from their jumping from city to city and woman to woman. Ebie's fate does not seem much better, but for the fact that she had made a change, even if it's one for the worse.

*Angels on Toast* envisions a place for women in the workforce but also satirizes the lofty ambitions that such placement implies. Ebie eventually chooses the country over the city and painting over advertising. In the eyes of her mother, it is the wrong choice—instead of making money, she "just paints" and "then she cries" (Powell 757). The root of Ebie's dissatisfaction at the novel's close is her lack of love—she saddles

herself a number of renovation projects, but never falls in love. She doesn't experience the "house love" that Garber writes about, nor does she seem particularly fond of Jay. Worst of all, she is no closer to reconciling her love of art with her love of money. This love triangle is much more fraught than the one between herself, Jay, and Jay's wife. Ebie's attraction to Jay ebbs and flows dependent on her tolerance of his witlessness, but her love of art and her desire to lead a fashionable and comfortable lifestyle guide her throughout the novel. Even when she retreats to Connecticut, ostensibly to be Jay's kept woman, she does so with the hope that she will spend more time painting.

All of these loose ends point to the inefficacy of the rigid boundaries between public and private, domesticity and desire, and highbrow and low. The focus on real estate and the constructed nature of home shows how public and private are collapsing in on each other, most notably in the disastrous development of Castles-in-the-Woods. For what is home if a hotel can emulate it so well? The novel also shakes up the idea of domestic bliss headed by a housewife. Powell completely dismantles the marriage plot: marriage is exposed by the novel as a strategy for social advancement, a public linkage, and nothing more. Ebie attempts to "settle down" and build a home with Jay, but she does so as his mistress. The relationship between domesticity and desire in the novel is complicated to the point that they no longer seem related at all. Also confused is the distinction between art and the commercial. Ebie's relationship to her work shows the pointlessness of artistic tiering: Ebie's marketability does not make her less intelligent or less talented. She is capable of producing fine art, her wit proves her to be smarter than the men she works for, and her commercial art does not fulfill her. As a potential highbrow artist in a commercial realm, Ebie's mere existence proves that these tiers

overlap. Ebie's story is messy, as are these categories. In *Angels on Toast*, Powell muddies these distinctions and shows how the middlebrow can encompass all of it, while remaining critical of these categories and of the limits they impose on women.

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