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Portraits of the New Woman in Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*, Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland*

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Introduction

This thesis focuses on the analysis of the cultural phenomenon of the New Woman, which developed in the American society from the last decades of the nineteenth century until the years before the Great Depression. In my work, I examined the evolution of the New Woman in three major literary works, each representing a peculiar version of this new female figure: Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*, Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland*.

In newspapers, literature and illustrations, a new female icon started to be described, different from the previous representations of womanhood in terms of behavior, physical appearance and desires, which expressed fears and hopes about the changing role of women in society. In order to better understand the consequences that led to the advent of the New Woman phenomenon, it is important to mention that several changes had affected the economic situation in the United States, resulting in important cultural and social transformations.

First of all, following the phenomenon of urbanization, a large part of the American population emigrated, settling in medium and large-sized cities that offered new job opportunities. As a result, the management of domestic spaces changed, as the home was no longer an economic center where people worked and produced for society. Most of the activities, indeed, started to be performed outside the domestic environment by professional figures.

In addition, there was the rise of the bourgeois class, which led to a significant change in the functions performed by women. Middle-class women started to be freed from traditional domestic tasks, becoming more and more interested in the public sphere and in the educational and working advantages it offered.

As a result of the economic and social developments which gave women the opportunity to detach from the domestic environment and explore new ways of life, a heated debate about the possible redefinition of the female identity began to divide the American society. The questioning of the conventional ideas about womanhood sanctioned in the Victorian Era occurred already in the course of the nineteenth century, a period dominated by the ideology referred to as the Cult of Domesticity or Cult of

True Womanhood, a set of beliefs about gender roles which established separate spheres of influence for men and women.

Under this cult, while men engaged in activities related to the public sphere, women were instead relegated to the duties of the domestic sphere. The woman was, in fact, responsible for the care and education of her children, she supported her husband and fulfilled traditional domestic roles. Moreover, she was considered the guardian of the home, whose sacredness she protected thanks to her moral superiority. However, the nature of women's domestic work promoted the idea that they were not suitable for physically and intellectually demanding jobs, and for this reason they were excluded from the public sphere.

Despite the restrictions to which women were subjected, they managed in some way to escape their confinement to the private sphere and achieve agency, to a certain extent, through the notion of "moral suasion", namely the fundamental positive influence they could exert on society. Indeed, the American woman was represented as a virtuous Republican citizen, endowed with an ethical and moral strength that allowed her to take care of the education of her children and teach them the values of the country.

But in the course of the nineteenth century, as I already mentioned, the home lost its economic and cultural centrality and the idea of women's power to uphold the national values merely through moral suasion started to be questioned. It was in this climate of change that the idea of a fixed female identity started to be debated. Women began to criticize some of the values associated with the Cult of Domesticity, claiming the right to some of the freedom and opportunities reserved exclusively to men. In the last decades of the nineteenth century, therefore, less constrained by Victorian laws and domestic life than previous generations, women had greater freedom to take decisions concerning the social and private sphere. They were slowly becoming more active members of society and were gradually affirming their presence in the workplace, gaining also access to adequate educational facilities.

At the end of the century, the increase in employment opportunities, together with the improvements made in the educational field, paved the way for a general re-assessment of the female condition, making women more independent and prepared to leave the old sphere. Following these events, new issues started to affect the American

scene, particularly in relation to the preservation of the family institution. The importance attributed to marriage began to be questioned, since it was conceived more as an option than as an obligation by more and more women, and by the end of the century a decrease in the number of married women and an increase in the divorce rate was recorded.

At the turn of the century, the new awareness acquired by women about the possibility of deciding with whom and how they wanted to spend their lives made them realize that in order to get free from male domination, they needed to exercise total control over their own bodies. This new sexual awareness reflected a new idea of female sexuality, which was markedly different from that of the Victorian era.

While the sexuality of a Victorian woman was considered a sacred virtue that became the property of a man through the act of marriage, late nineteenth-century women rejected the role of sexual objects and became the main agents of their sexuality. The realization of women's sexual autonomy manifested especially after their entrance into the public sphere and the broadening of their social relations. Many women started to flirt freely with men, some engaged in adulterous relationships, while others experienced homosexuality.

The new images of womanhood that circulated at the end of the century, which marked a break with the True Woman of the Victorian era, generally depicted the New Woman as a white middle-class woman, independent, educated and intelligent. She was not associated with a single image, but embodied a multiplicity of characteristics and attitudes, which allowed each woman to create her own version of this female icon. The New Woman was in fact a widespread cultural phenomenon, embodied by revolutionary versions that rejected the values celebrated by the Cult of Domesticity, but also by moderate versions that retained some of them and even conservative ones, whose novelty was limited to the sphere of dress and sports but did not challenge the idea that women were destined to be wives and mothers.

This new female image represented therefore various types of women, e.g. factory workers, athletes, reformers involved in women's clubs, middle-class women who gained access to higher education and professions once reserved for men only, and even modern versions of the Victorian woman, who was self-confident, and intelligent, but still believed in domesticity as the proper female activity.

The image of the New Woman was also associated with feminists, who promoted ideas of freedom and equality, claiming in particular equal rights, equal pay, economic independence and sexual freedom. The New Woman's mobilization into politics made her associated also with the suffrage movement of the turn of the century, within which New women became active participants in the campaign for women's suffrage, fighting for the right to vote which was only granted to men.

The icon of the New Woman was also embodied by more licentious versions, such as those represented by the flappers. They began to appear on the American scene by the Twenties and were typically described as independent and unprincipled women, who represented a new idea of fashion and emphasized pleasure and free sexuality, marking a distance from the Victorian stereotypes of the submissive bourgeois woman.

Of all the versions associated with the New Woman in the years that saw her development in the American society, the one which was most appreciated by the general public was the representation of a modern but gentle and delicate feminine icon embodied by the Gibson Girl. Unlike her free-spirited contemporaries who aimed at changing the standard female image by challenging gender roles, this female icon embodied a more conservative version and forged a new ideal of beauty in the late nineteenth-century century American society.

The Gibson Girl was the incarnation of the white, bourgeois and native-born American woman. She was typically described as a single, well educated, clever woman, involved in physical activities and enjoying a comfortable lifestyle. As an exponent of a new idea of feminine beauty within the American society, the Gibson Girl promoted the image of a fashionable, athletic and independent woman, whose skills and beauty embodied the modernity of the US and its best democratic values.

She symbolized a New Woman version that was certainly modern, but not too radical. She aspired to self-realization and to the achievement a certain degree of independence, but she never tried to overcome the boundaries of traditional feminine roles. Since she believed in the importance of the institution of marriage and in the preservation of the progress of the human race, she could alleviate men's fears towards the dissolution of Victorian values, thus promoting the image of a woman who was modern and freer than her mother but still bound to the family institution.

In the phase of transition between the historical periods within which the cultural phenomenon of the New Woman flourished, one still closely related to the conservative values promoted by the Cult of Domesticity, the other instead characterized by the advent of a modern consumerist culture, lies the female figure of Lily Bart, namely the main character of Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*.

Lily is a young American single woman, who belongs to the leisure class of the late-nineteenth century New York society and embodies the female stereotype of the Victorian woman who aspires to marry a rich man and lead a life of riches, thus assuming a decorative function as an object of desire to men's eyes. However, while Lily retains these Victorian traits, she also adopts an unconventional attitude that reveals, along the novel, her desire for autonomy and freedom in making decisions that affect her own life, against the limitations imposed by the social cage in which she lives.

Among the New Woman versions appeared in the American society at the turn of the century, there was also the *femme fatale*, namely the archetype of the sensual woman evoked by the fascinating Salomé. The general public attributed the *femme fatale* with modern and revolutionary characteristics, such as the transgression of gender codes and the association with free sexuality, which were perceived as dangerous and threatening for the well-being of the nation. Comparing the New Woman to a sensual and predatory figure was meant to caution men against the vicious and loose nature of women who rejected their traditional domestic role and were causing a serious upheaval within society.

With the advent of modernity, women slowly began to move into the urban context, accessing public spaces and the advantages that it offered. Since women were no longer responsible for certain domestic functions, they could buy what they needed outside the domestic walls, becoming thus consumers. Women walked the streets without fear of being defamed or harassed, and the establishment of an increasing number of department stores, easily reachable thanks to the new transport networks, allowed them to walk around the city while buying at shopping centers, becoming thus leaders in mass consumption and main protagonists of the modern city.

In this modern context of the end of the nineteenth century, Theodore Dreiser sets the heroine of his novel *Sister Carrie*. Carrie is a young country girl who decides to move to the big city of Chicago and embodies the modern and transgressive version of

the New Woman, who uses her beauty and sensual manners in order to fulfill her desires.

In my work, I analyze the ambitious, determined and self-centered nature of Carrie, who acts as a mistress to wealthy men and tries to manipulate them, working thus her way up the social ladder. Along the novel, she also comes to represent the typical female consumer of the late-nineteenth century American society, becoming the protagonist of the modern city life, which stimulates in her the desire for material success and intensifies her longing for lust and money.

At the end of the nineteenth century, the emergence of the New Woman in the literary culture and popular press began to elicit diverging opinions, since it was appreciated by some but despised by others. In the pages of the magazines, the New Woman was often represented as a threat to the gendered social order, since she began to show herself in public by adopting male behavior.

The New Woman's interest in the male sphere was manifested by a multitude of characteristics, one of which concerned her new way of dressing, which consisted in the adoption of the so-called "rational dress". The New Woman abandoned the typical corsets and long petticoats, which limited their movements and embodied their previous confined domestic lives, and replaced them with shortened skirts and comfy bloomers, i.e. a sort of loose trousers gathered at the knees, for those who were more radical, and with plain-fitting skirts for the rest. This clothing style gave therefore the New Woman more freedom of movement and allowed her to be more athletic and to wear practical clothes when entering the workplace.

The dress reform was met with broad approval, especially with the invention of the bicycle at the end of the nineteenth century. The use of comfortable clothing combined with recreational purposes, such as cycling, helped promoting the image of a carefree woman riding her bicycle while proudly wearing bloomers despite the accusations of vulgarity. The bicycle was a central element of the New Woman figure, since it symbolized freedom, modernity, athleticism and independence. It became an emblem of women's physical emancipation and it generated several concerns in the male society, as it challenged gender norms. This new means of transport reinforced, in fact, a feeling of freedom among women, who had thus new possibilities to move away from the physical boundaries of domestic space.

Along with changes in dress and sports, women took also care of their appearance by trying new haircuts. While many believed that all these changes would make women less delicate and unattractive, most young women decided it was time to pick the look that best suited them and to do what they pleased with their own body.

The reversal of gender roles represented by women's new style of dress and appearance is well described in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's novel *Herland*. In this utopian isolated country, Gilman sets a highly developed and all-female community within which women embody a radical version of the New Woman at the turn of the century. In my work, I underline that Gilman aims to disrupt the gender norms of her society by depicting a new type of woman, who, through her behavior and physical connotations, subverts the traditional ideas and institutions of the male-dominated society, e.g. femininity, sexuality, the institution of marriage and the education, and is free from submission to men and able to express her own identity.

In addition to the spread of the rational dress reform, of the bicycle and of a new change in women's appearance, American society at the *fin-de-siècle* witnessed another major change that revolutionized the previous tradition, namely the presence of women in clubs. At the turn of the twentieth century, an increasing number of women gathered in clubs, which became places for preparing women for public life and for helping them to pursue a professional career.

Many clubs were created for philanthropic purposes, e.g. establishing hospital care for orphans and providing care for the poor through the supply of food and the collection of clothes. Other clubs were founded with the aim of enhancing women's knowledge about issues related to national debates at the turn of the century. Although many clubs were established for educational and missionary purposes, there were others that served as places of entertainment.

These clubs became one of the main interests of the popular press and numerous caricatures depicting club women dressed in male clothing while smoking, drinking and chatting humorously were realized by the end of the nineteenth century. The inclusion of women in clubs was criticized by men, who feared that women might abandon domestic duties and commit themselves to new social activities. Moreover, the male presence in women's clubs was rather limited, if not absent, and this aroused concerns among men, since they could not exercise a total control over women.

In conclusion, at the end of the nineteenth century, the New Woman became the main subject of press criticism, which represented the new changes brought by women, which were revolutionizing the conventional notion of femininity, through the use of parodies and caricatures. However male irony was not able to stop the rise of the New Woman. This new female icon, at the same time modern, consumerist, fashionable, but also masculine, revolutionary and radical, contributed to represent women of the turn of the century in a new light, different from the Victorian ones of previous generation and open to new transformations.

Chapter One

The New Woman

1.1 Questioning Female Identity in the Nineteenth Century

In the last decades of the nineteenth century, a new female figure began to appear in the American society. In literature, magazines and illustrations, this image of woman was represented as something new compared to the feminine ideal that existed before. A new female typology, that differed from the previous one in various characteristics, started in fact to be described. The term used to refer to this new image was that of New Woman, namely a new female icon that was revolutionizing the role of women in society.

Before the advent of the New Woman, important changes affected the economic situation in the United States, bringing about social and cultural transformations. First of all, the phenomenon of urbanization: a large mass of people moved to the city, which resulted in a marginalization of an agrarian culture based on the importance of the independent household and of the activities that took place in it, generally carried out by female figures.

In the nineteenth century households were mostly located in the country. Women handled domestic tasks such as laundering, cooking and weaving, and were involved in many other chores, e.g. harvesting and raising livestock. The economic survival of the family depended mostly on the work done within the household, but in the second half of the nineteenth century this started to change.

As a large part of the population of the United States migrated and settled in medium and large-sized cities which offered new job opportunities, the management of domestic spaces inevitably changed. The house was no longer an economic center, where people worked and produced for society, as most activities started to be performed outside the domestic environment by professional figures.

This period of change saw also the rise of the bourgeois class, which brought about a remarkable change in the functions fulfilled by women. Middle-class women

began to be freed from conventional domestic tasks and became interested in the public sphere and in the educational and employment benefits that it offered.

As a consequence of the economic developments which gave women the possibility to detach from the domestic environment and explore new ways of life, a heated debate about the possible redefinition of female identity started to divide the American society.

Questioning of the traditional female identity had already occurred during the nineteenth century, a period dominated by an ideology referred to as the Cult of Domesticity. Also known as the Cult of True Womanhood, the Cult of Domesticity was a set of beliefs about gender roles in nineteenth-century American society and it established separate spheres of influence for men and women.

This division was made necessary by the process of industrialization, which profoundly changed the social structure of the country. At the end of the eighteenth century, the United States began to transform into a capitalist society that pushed men to become more and more competitive in the labor market. This was perceived as a threat to American values and there was a deep need for envisioning the home as a force that was able to counter the corruption of the public sphere. According to the Cult of Domesticity, men could find shelter from external temptations in the domestic sphere, where corruption did not exist and within which they were exposed to a benevolent influence.

While men belonged to the public sphere of politics, business and work, women were confined to the private one of the house and family. As Deborah Rotman states, "the home was defined as a private, female sphere in opposition to the public economic sphere of men" (Rotman 2006: 666).

The ideal woman under the Cult of Domesticity had to raise well-behaved children, support her husband and preserve the morals of nineteenth-century American society. Moreover, she was responsible for the care of the house, which was conceptualized as a sort of heaven for the rest of the family. Since women were considered the guardians of this heaven, they had to keep it warm and virtuous.

According to Barbara Welter,

> the attributes of True Womanhood, by which a woman judged herself and was judged by her husband, her neighbors and society could be divided into four cardinal virtues-piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity. […] Without them, no matter whether there was fame, achievement or wealth, all was ashes. With them she was promised happiness and power. (Welter 1966: 152)

Under the Cult of Domesticity women held the moral supremacy, monitoring the domestic sphere and fulfilling traditional domestic roles. The nature of women's domestic work promoted, however, the idea that the latter were not suitable for physically and intellectually demanding jobs.

In addition to physical features, women's inferiority to men was also attributed to the tiny shape of their brain, which limited their intellectual abilities. Scientists believed that the small size of the female brain reduced women's mental abilities, thus enabling them to perform simple domestic tasks that did not require a complicated intellectual effort, but making them unfit for higher learning.

Women were also considered emotionally weaker than men and therefore unsuitable to withstand the pressure coming from the outside world. According to Patricia Marks, "their emotional, intuitive responses, their innocence, and their lack of education were inappropriate for a hard-bitten business world in which money, rather than personal relationship, was the goal" (Marks 1990: 55). While these qualities positively distinguished women within the domestic sphere, they also could not ensure them to be successful in the competitive public sphere.

The rooted belief in the natural predisposition of women to self-sacrifice and the care of others prevented them from receiving adequate health care when ideas about female identity were involved. Postpartum depression was, for example, a frequent disease among women, but it was commonly treated as if they were not really sick. It was thought in fact natural for women to have children and devote their whole time to their care, since it was the purpose that God entrusted to them, and those affected by this nervous disorder were thus classified as unnatural women.

Along with depression, hysteria was conceived as another purely feminine disease, resulting mainly from inappropriate intellectual activity which damaged women's reproductive system making them hysterical. Those affected had to follow a rest cure, which was meant to calm patients' nerves and discourage them from pursuing

any kind of mental exercise. Furthermore, the prescription of this treatment required the patient to be isolated and this guaranteed men the authority to keep women under their watch.

However, despite all the restrictions to which they were submitted and their acceptance of entrapment in the domestic sphere, women somehow managed to escape their confinement to the private realm and achieve agency, to a certain extent, through the notion of "moral suasion", namely the fundamental positive influence they could exert on society.

The felt importance of their role, together with the moral authority gained within the house, enabled them to exercise their influence outside the domestic environment, for example by rising well-educated children and passing down to them important American principles, such as patriotism. The American woman was represented in fact as a virtuous republican citizen, provided with an ethical and moral strength that allowed her to take care of the education of children and teach them the values of the country.

It was in this climate of change that the idea of a fixed female identity started to be debated. Women began to realize that they were not given the same opportunities as men and started to criticize some of the values associated with the Cult of Domesticity and to claim the right to some of the opportunities and freedom reserved to men.

One of the most representative documents of the movement for the assertion of women's rights was the Declaration of Sentiments, presented at the Seneca Falls convention held in New York in 1848. It was based on Thomas Jefferson's Declaration of Independence and resumed thus as a male document that guaranteed men's rights. It is considered a fundamental act of claim, because on the one hand it recognized the rights of men, on the other one it demanded women's equality with men before the law, in education and employment. This document represented thus an important attempt of mediation and it anticipated the debate on the woman question, which would flourish with the advent of the New Woman.

In conclusion, although the Cult of Domesticity limited women's agency to the household, it developed networks that allowed them to gather together and support each other, laying the groundwork for the later development of the women's rights movement.

1.2 The Emergence of the New Woman

The last decades of the nineteenth century saw a gradual change in social habits concerning gender relations, since they were characterized by women's progressive detachment from the values imposed by the male patriarchal community of that time. Less bound by Victorian laws and domestic life than earlier generations, women had greater freedom to make decisions related to social and private spheres. They were slowly becoming more active participants in life as members of society and were gradually establishing their presence in the workplace.

However, even though women had new chances for finding good jobs as better-paying opportunities became available in the city, their path into work life was not without obstacles. From the very beginning, working women from the lower classes faced gender's inequality at work, since they were generally underpaid and forced to work under male hierarchy's terms.

They started to be employed in a wide range of low-paying fields, e.g. manufacturing, housekeeping and nursing. As Martha Patterson states, women's working conditions were quite poor, with "wages far lower than their male counterparts, hours long, advancement opportunities few, and safety measures almost nonexistent" (Patterson 2005: 9). Nevertheless, even if they lacked power in the workplace, working-class women could still earn an income. Wages gave women more independence, allowing them to support their needs and acquire a greater degree of self-confidence.

Fewer in number than working-class females, some women managed to pursue careers from which they once were excluded. Many were employed in white-collar jobs, which allowed them to gain better wages and experience favorable working conditions.

Following the increasing number of women in the public arena, there was also a rise in professionalism. Several women started to be interested in pursuing medical and juridical careers. As Marks writes, these professions "attracted women of unusual determination who not only threatened the careers but challenged the self-esteem of their male counterparts" (Marks 1990: 74). According to Sally Ledger,

> women could occupy jobs traditionally reserved for men […] and it was clear towards the close of the century that women were becoming competitors in the more privileged sections of the economic marketplace to an extent that had never before been apparent. (Ledger 1997: 19)

The fact that women's involvement in manual and intellectual professions allowed them to gain a new economic independence was not well accepted by men, because, as Deborah Kolb claims, they feared that women "would lose interest in family matters and respect for the man as head of the household" (Kolb 1975: 156). Not all husbands agreed that their wives had a job, because that would distract them from taking care of children and household chores. Moreover, men feared that the new economic independence acquired by women could put them in a secondary financial position, thus depriving them of all responsibility and diminishing the economic primacy on which their position within the society was based.

Even women who aspired to follow a writing career and could therefore exercise their job within their homes were not exempt from criticism. According to Marks, men believed that "it augured ill for the sanctity of the domestic sphere, supposedly safe from the taint of business" (Marks 1990: 80).

Although at the turn of the century many women still worked as domestic servants, proving that tradition could not be quickly left behind, wage labor was slowly changing women's identities, enforcing their own abilities and making them aware of the positive contribution they could make through their work to the society.

In the last decades of the nineteenth century, in addition to the small goals achieved by women in the working sphere, several improvements for women were also made in the field of education, as the latter could finally have access to it in appropriate school facilities. According to Ledger, "many new secondary schools for girls were founded, all committed to high academic standards, examinations and trained teachers" (Ledger 1997: 17). The value of education began to lie at the heart of many women's lives, as it guaranteed them equality and the possibility of acquiring a new independence.

Women made their first entrance into colleges pursuing careers such as teaching, nursing and social work. Lots of college graduates became settlement house workers, social reformers and social workers, developing solid networks among them in educational facilities and settlement houses, where they could place their educational skills at the service of the poor.

Access to higher education marked a step forward for women as compared to previous generations, since before the end of the nineteenth century the education

system was dominated by men. While boys were taught to read and write from a young age, girls learned household chores such as sewing and cooking and were only offered "ornamental education" that enhanced their value on the marriage market.

Women, judged inferior by nature, had no access to scholastic institutions or educational programs and were thus exempt from receiving a proper education. It was in fact believed that biologically they had a smaller mental capacity than men and were therefore not considered capable of dedicating themselves to a discipline as demanding as that of higher learning. Some scholars argued also that the mental effort in pursuing academic studies could damage women's reproductive capacities, as they were judged too fragile to withstand such a burden.

Furthermore, the idea of providing women with a good level of education that could allow them to have good career prospects for their future upset men, who feared for the first time that their job position could be compromised, given that, as Marks writes, "if women worked and were educated as men were, […] then they were likely to blur the distinction between the genders" (Marks 1990: 116).

At the end of the century, female education was not the only challenge faced by the male community, as new issues affected the American scene, specifically in the preservation of the family institution. The importance given to marriage started to be questioned and despite plenty of women conceived it as a safe means to live well both in social and economic terms, by the end of the century a decrease in the number of married women was registered.

The rise in working opportunities, along with improvements made in the educational field, opened the way to a general revaluation of women's status, making them more prepared to leave the old sphere. As a result, with the value of marriage being debated and the acquisition of a new economic independence, financial protection offered by men was no longer seen as necessary and marriage was conceived more as an option than an obligation.

The decrease of the importance attributed to the value of marriage did not receive positive reactions from the male community. First of all, due to the general assumption of women's limited intellectual skills, they were not held capable of handling their own financial affairs properly. Secondly, the idea that women could live their existence without fulfilling the role of wife and mother that God reserved to them

reflected the male dread that the rooted institution of family would break into pieces, damaging the human race as a whole.

By the end of the nineteenth century, many women still respected the sacred union of matrimony, but they kept a position of economic independence outside marriage. Furthermore, since marriage was conceived more as a choice than a duty, many women postponed it to a later age, giving priority to their careers. Those women who were instead against following the impositions dictated by the sacrament of marriage, questioned marital norms and chose not to marry and have children.

At the turn of the century, the institution of marriage was no longer regarded as the ultimate goal of female lives and the degree of economic independence they acquired freed women from the need to depend on the economic stability provided by their male partners. This led to an increase in the divorce rate in the American society, which was mostly made possible thanks to the promulgation of new divorce laws granting new legal rights to women.

Before the last decades of the nineteenth century, the granting of divorce by women's will was almost considered a utopia. Given their subjection to the authority of the male figure, they found it difficult to justify the reasons that led them to appeal for divorce, such as abandonment, violence and adultery. However, through the enactment of new divorce reforms aiming at protecting women's interests, small improvements were carried out in the American society, making the US the first nation in number of divorces by the twenties.

At the end of the nineteenth century, the new awareness acquired by women about the possibility of deciding with whom and how they wanted to spend their lives made them realize that in order to get free of male domination, they needed to exercise total control of their own body. They had thus to be in charge of their own decisions, meaning that they could decide how to use their own sexuality, which filled men with new concerns.

This new sexual awareness reflected a new idea of female sexuality, which was markedly different from that of previous generations. In the Victorian era, a woman's sexuality was a sacred virtue which became the property of a man through the act of marriage. Women were considered the guardians of morality because, unlike men, they were not believed to be driven by sexual urges.

On the contrary, women of the turn of the century started to reject the role of sexual objects by becoming main agents of their own sexuality. This new sexual awareness was mostly manifested following women's entrance into the public sphere, which enabled them to broaden their social relationships. Many women started then to flirt freely with men, some engaged in adulterous love affairs, while others became involved with homosexuality, experimenting new lesbian relationships.

New Women's transgression of gender codes and the association with free sexuality made them become associated in the public opinion with the *femme fatale*, namely the archetype of the sensual woman evoked by the charming Salomé. According to Rosina Neginsky, "the image of Salome, of a girl who murders through her charm, beauty and dance, became one of the most popular images of the *femme fatale*, the symbol of the beautiful destroyer. […] This image played a crucial role in creating the myth of women in the period" (Neginsky 2013: 74). The act of comparing the New Woman to a sensual and predatory figure was meant to underline the vicious and passionate nature of this late-Victorian female icon, who was causing deep stirring within the society.

Women emphasized and cared about their sexual autonomy, but this was hard to accomplish, as society still expressed strong dissent towards any sign of female deviation from traditional gender roles. As a result, at the turn of the century, women had conflicting views about the female role in modern society. For every woman who supported and experimented with new forms of gender identity, there was, in fact, another who chose to stick with the old values.

While some young women became prostitutes in exchange for money or used their sexuality in return for expensive clothes and special evenings in new luxurious places of the modern society, for others, according to Patterson, "the New Woman's sexuality […was] a threat both to the marital fidelity necessary to insure rightful paternity and to the maternal devotion necessary to insure racial progress" (Patterson 2005: 40).

Middle-class women supporters of the old values tried to prevent the spread of new sexual practices, fearing that they would jeopardize main social institutions, mainly that of marriage and family. Every sexual activity carried out outside of marriage was in

fact judged as corrupt and the ability to maintain social respectability represented a real challenge for women who chose unconventional lives.

At the end of the nineteenth century, even though women did not carry out a total revolution against prescribed gender roles, they tried to shift the boundaries of what was considered permissible and they attempted to do so in the modern world that developed following the rapid industrialization and the growing expansion of the market. It was in this modern urban landscape that a huge crowd of women made for the first time their appearance onto the American streets.

While until the second half of the nineteenth century women seen walking in the street had a negative reputation, as they were mostly considered prostitutes, with the advent of modernity every woman began to move into the urban setting, accessing the public spaces and the advantages that it offered. Women walked the urban streets without fear of being defamed or harassed. According to Ledger,

> The New Woman, to put it bluntly, wanted the streets of the metropolis to herself, free of the constraints imposed by the impropriety associated with the appearance of unaccompanied women in the public spaces of the city. To enter the public domain, the New Woman had to confront and avoid the label 'public woman', which at the *fin de siècle* was synonymous with 'streetwalker'. (Ledger 1997: 154)

The progress towards modernity that invested the American society at the turn of the century enabled women to appropriate the public sphere to a certain extent, as according to Ledger, "the expansion of consumerism in the latter half of the century further blurred the public/private distinctions, as middle-class women moved out to the public spaces of the department stores" (Ledger 1997: 151). Women were no longer responsible for certain domestic functions, e.g. weaving or food preparation, but they could buy what they needed outside the domestic walls, becoming thus consumers.

The establishment of an ever-increasing number of huge department stores, easily reachable thanks to the new transport networks, allowed women to take a stroll through the city while buying at shopping centers and meeting with friends in cafés. With the emergence of the new consumer culture, women became leaders in mass consumption and the main protagonists of the modern city. As Patterson writes,

> the period between 1895 and 1915 witnessed a revolution in the display and marketing of manufactured goods in American culture. New electrically lit department stores and more aggressive advertising strategies worked together to create new desires among primarily female consumers. (Patterson 2005: 9)

At the turn of the century, as Ledger writes, the modern city swarmed with "female music hall performers, shopping ladies, shop girls, glamorised 'girls in business', female charity workers, […] platform women, match girls, women journalists, clerks and typists" (Ledger 1997: 155). The redefinition of the public sphere, in addition to providing women with places of entertainment where to spend their spare time, led them to look for new job opportunities and ways of self-expression.

It was in this period of transformation that the figure of the New Woman emerged in the American society. Despite numerous discussions about the origin of the term, the general consensus dates it back to an article published in March 1894 by the *North American Review*, entitled "The New Aspect of the Woman Question" and written by the novelist Sarah Grand. According to the author,

> the new woman […] has been sitting apart in silent contemplation all these years thinking and thinking, until at last she solved the problem and proclaimed for herself what was wrong with Home-is-the-Woman's Sphere, and prescribed the remedy. (Grand 1894: 271)

This new icon of the end of the century marked a break with the True Woman of the Victorian era. She was generally portrayed as a white middle-class woman who was independent, educated and intelligent. The New Woman, however, was not associated with a single image, but she embodied a multiplicity of characteristics and behaviors, which allowed every woman to create her own version of this female icon. The New Woman was in fact a broad cultural phenomenon embodied by revolutionary versions, which questioned the values celebrated by the Cult of Domesticity, but also by moderate versions and even conservative ones.

This new female image could therefore represent various types of women, namely factory workers, feminists, suffragettes, female athletes, reformers involved in women's clubs, middle-class females who gained access to higher education and professions once reserved for men only and even modern versions of the Victorian woman, self-confident, intelligent, but still believing in domesticity as the proper female activity.

1.3 The New Woman in the Conservative Press: The Rise of the Manly Woman

At the turn of the century, the New Woman became a modern phenomenon, embodying a sort of cultural anxiety that involved everyone. It reflected what was changing in women's lives and the evidence of this transformation was mostly documented in literary texts and in the press.

The feminization of the literary canon of the *fin-de-siècle*, which had already begun in the first half of the nineteenth century, witnessed a generation of New Women who entered the public sphere as writers. Through their literary works, they aimed at giving greater voice to women's issues and worked to redefine their role within the American society. New Woman writers tried to import innovative contents in their works, e.g. inversion of gender roles, sexuality, consumerism and new narrative forms, such as realistic and experimental novels.

According to Elizabeth Ammons, New Women writers were "clearly breaking with the past; and the major break [...] consisted in their avowed ambition, with few exceptions, to be artists" (Ammons 1992: 4). Unlike women writers of the Cult of Domesticity, who mostly claimed to make use of writing in practical terms, e.g. to support their family, New Women writers of the late nineteenth century did it for the sake of writing and claimed their artistic ambitions, using their works to spread ideals and conceiving their writing career as a way to express themselves, not just as a mere profession from which to earn a profit. Combining the role of artist with that of writer implied a request for change and several New Women managed to do so through their literary works.

At the end of the nineteenth century, the possibility for a woman to embark on a writing career was not without challenges and obstacles. In addition to gender prejudices generated by the evolutionary theories circulating in the second half of the nineteenth century, there were also racial discriminations which deeply affected the position of women of color. Racial bias in white American society was very intense and black women were often ethnically labelled as prostitutes or maids, but hardly as writers. Moreover, most editors were white and usually more interested in women's physical appearance than in their intellectual capacities.

The feminization of the literary field was not well-regarded by the male bourgeois elite, who thought of itself as the true representative of the literary culture and feared that women's incursion into the literary canon would devalue it, due the focus on women's issues. As a result, at the end of the nineteenth century the emergence of the New Woman in the literary culture and popular press began to arouse diverging opinions, since it was appreciated by some but repudiated by others. In the pages of magazines, the New Woman was often depicted as a threat to the gendered social order, as she began to show herself in public while adopting male behaviors.

The New Woman's aspiration to the male sphere was noted in a variety of traits, one of this concerning her new way of dressing, namely the adoption of the "rational dress". Until the last decades of the nineteenth century, women's clothing reflected their confined lives. Bulky skirts and tight corsets were uncomfortable since they limited women's movements, but they were judged suitable for the representation of delicate and charming women.

The attempts made to change this clothing style resulted in the "rational dress" reform, whereby the typical corsets and long petticoats were abandoned and replaced by shortened skirts and comfy bloomers, i.e. a sort of loose trousers gathered at the knees. While previous long garments left only the ankles uncovered, now these new bifurcated clothes showed the whole leg.

This unexpected change in fashion contrasted with the delicacy of the clinging skirts of the Victorian age, but it gave the New Woman a greater freedom of movement and allowed her to be more athletic and to wear practical clothes when entering the workplace. Furthermore, the possibility to wear larger clothes allowed women to be healthier, since their internal organs were no longer compressed by harmful and tight garments.

At the turn of the century, the new mannish style adopted by women scandalized the male society, since according to Marks, "rather than an expression of female frivolity, the New Woman's dress was, for the most part, a representation of the ideas she stood for. The outfit that announced subliminally that a man was in control carried the same message when a woman wore it" (Marks 1990: 148). Fashion thus became a means by which women could express their identity and exercise some control over their lives, causing concern to the male community who feared a possible reversal of

gender roles due to the widespread popularity that this dress reform aroused among women.

This reform met with wide approval, especially with the invention of the bicycle at the end of the nineteenth century. The use of comfortable clothing combined with recreational purposes, such as cycling, helped promoting the image of a free-thinking woman riding her bike while proudly wearing bloomers despite the accusations of vulgarity.

This bicycle craze was recorded by the press of the time, which reported numerous images of athletic women riding their bikes, dressed in jacket, garbed in bloomers with hats on their heads. As the cartoon below depicts, a bourgeois man looks astonished at the sight of a woman dressed in masculine clothing and mischievously staring at him while holding the bicycle with her hand.

Figure 1. "Fashion à la Shakspeare", *Punch*, 11 September (1897): 110.

The bicycle was a central feature of the New Woman figure, as it symbolized freedom, modernity, athleticism and independence. It became an emblem of women's physical

emancipation and it generated several worries in the male society, since it challenged gender norms.

First, physicians argued that physical activities practiced by women were dangerous for the development of the human race. The physical exercise derived from the act of pedaling would cause women the loss of energy during pregnancy, thus provoking the risk of giving birth to unhealthy children or even causing abortions.

Secondly, women were discouraged from the activity of cycling because the development of muscles on a female body would lead to a loss of delicacy and refinement. This gender transformation would result in a masculinization of women and would pose a threat to man's virility. In this regard, the destruction of the image of the delicate woman was parodied in the satirical press, which published sketches representing overweight women trying to learn how to ride a bike with the help of their male relatives, as the caricature below shows.

Figure 2. “Miss Heavytopp’s Bicycle Lesson”, *Punch*, 13 September (1899): 129.

Lastly, men felt threatened by the independence that women could gain by using their bikes to move freely through the streets without a male escort. This new means of transport bolstered, in fact, a feeling of freedom among women, who had new chances to move away from the physical boundaries of the domestic space. As Marks says, the New Woman, “no longer confined to the home or hoping to escape from the vicissitudes

of earning a living, […] actively seeks new experience and intends to have some impact on the world around her" (Marks 1990: 175).

Along with the positive influence on women promoted by the advent of the bicycle, many of them started to engage in several physical activities. Some became interested in playing masculine sports, such as hunting and boxing, while others preferred more competitive sports, e.g. cricket and basketball, which helped them to gain a sense of fair play and to strengthen team spirit.

At the end of the nineteenth century, the image of the New Woman dressed in bloomers and perched on a bicycle revolutionized the norms of chaperonage and travel. Her clothes reflected male style and were thus thought to violate gender roles, but she wore them despite the social allegations of obscenity and vulgarity. Although many female cyclists still kept wearing less comfy but more socially acceptable long skirts, those who instead dared to wear bloomers while pedaling embodied a new spirit of independence which deeply altered the way men looked at women.

Along with changes in dress and sports, women took also care of their appearance by trying new haircuts. Hair was thus cut, coiled, banged and dyed. While many believed that all these changes would make women less delicate and unattractive, most young women decided it was time to pick the look that best suited them and to do what they pleased with their own body.

In addition to the spread of the rational dress reform and of the bicycle, the American society at the *fin-de-siècle* witnessed another major change that revolutionized the previous tradition, namely the presence of women in clubs. At the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, a growing number of women gathered in clubs, reaching a peak of almost two million members in the early twenties. These clubs were mostly organized according to religion, race and class lines and were seen as places for preparing women to public life and for helping them to pursue a working career.

The sense of union shared in clubs consolidated women's spirit and contributed to the creation of a sisterhood community, serving to strengthen women's role within the society. As Marks writes, "this spirit of altruism was expressed in America in both formal and informal clubs, many of which were instrumental in improving social conditions for people in all walks" (Marks 1990: 118).

Many clubs were established for philanthropic purposes, e.g. establishing hospital care for orphans and providing care for poor people through the collection of clothes and the supply of food. In particular, middle-class women who ran these clubs played a leading role in improving society through voluntary service to the community.

Other clubs were created with the aim of enhancing women's knowledge about issues regarding the national debates at the turn of the century. Several clubwomen held in fact discussions and presented speeches on current topics, enabling women to achieve a greater knowledge on the educational, social and political level.

Similar organizations arose also among middle-class African American women, who mainly focused their efforts on debating race and educational issues. These women attempted to claim inclusion in the American society by seeking support in clubs, which could help them to promote demands for racial equality and challenge white derogatory stereotypes of blackness.

Even though plenty of clubs were founded for educational and missionary purposes, there were others that served as places of entertainment. These clubs became one of the main focuses of the popular press and many caricatures portraying club women dressed in male clothing while smoking, drinking and chatting humorously were realized by the end of the nineteenth century.

At the end of the nineteenth century, the pages of the popular American magazine *Life* revealed a peculiar interest in representing the new changes brought by the New Woman. As the illustration for *Life* magazine below shows, dandified women enjoying smoking and drinking, while a man in the background is performing with a dancer tutu. The women do not sit like real ladies, while male authority is vilified by the man dressed in feminine clothing. By depicting women who are emulating men's attitudes, the sketch aims at highlighting the switch of gender roles, becoming therefore a parody of the manly woman.

Figure 3. “In a Twentieth Century Club”, *Life*, 13 June (1895): 395.

According to Marks, along with the representation of women’s mannish attitudes, the sketches of *Life* magazine showed also the journal’s “liberty in depicting the sexual nuances of the phenomenon” (Marks 1990: 127), as the drawing below shows. Women in the foreground seem to cast mischievous glances at each other, one while picking up her hair with her hands, the other raising her long skirt to show a glimpse of her leg. Besides the depiction of manly clothing and of women’s masculine habits of smoking and drinking in the background, the image portrays also a woman holding a cricket bat in the foreground, alluding thus to the New Woman’s engagement in leisure activities, all of which suggested her bourgeois origin.

Figure 4. “Girls Will be Girls”, *Life*, 8 July (1897): 30-31.

The inclusion of women in clubs was frowned upon by men, as they feared that women might abandon domestic duties and commit themselves to new social activities. In addition, male presence in women’s clubs was rather limited, if not absent, and this aroused concerns among men, since they could not exercise a total control over women.

At the end of the nineteenth century, the New Woman became the main subject of press criticism, which through the use of parodies and caricatures depicted the new changes brought by women, revolutionizing thus the conventional understanding of femininity in favor of a more modern one. Moreover, according to Marks, while the British press was more critical of the challenges posed by the New Woman, “American magazines paid attention to the new phenomenon but were more likely to treat the new styles and manners as provocative or humorous than threatening, perhaps because of their democratic bias” (Marks 1990: 19).

The American press representation of the changes as a process of defeminization affecting women at the end of the nineteenth century, in addition to illustrating satirical drawings reflecting athletic women wearing male clothing and emulating men’s

attitudes within male places, included also caricatures which satirized the manly woman's professional rise in the workplace.

As the illustration provided by *Life* magazine shows, a group of mannish New Women are gathered in a brigade and dressed in uniform, with bloomers and hats according to their ranks. The aim of the illustrator is to symbolize in a light satire the new power achieved by women in the military sphere, alluding to the revolution these women are bringing to the military sector by creating a group of their own.

Figure 5. "The New Navy, about 1900 A.D.", *Life*, 16 April (1896): 310-11.

In conclusion, the representation of the New Woman by the conservative press of the *fin-de-siècle* generated a variety of controversial responses in the public opinion. While some censured the New Woman, portraying her as an unappealing revolutionary of gender roles, others praised her modern style and her active participation in social organizations, exalting her as a self-reliant and inspiring figure.

1.4 The New Woman: a New Image of Womanhood Represented by Multiple Female Identities

The New Woman was a cultural phenomenon involving a plurality of women who came of age between 1890 and 1920, each varying by race, class and age. By slowly asserting her presence within society, she gave women the possibility to challenge traditional social roles and express themselves in a new modern light.

Since the New Woman did not represent a single female image, she became associated with a variety of appearances with which any woman could identify. First, following the increasing influence of women in reform movements and politics in the late nineteenth century, several New Women identified themselves with feminist ideals. New Women feminists promoted ideas of freedom and equality, demanding in particular equal rights, equal wages, economic independence, sexual freedom, and denounced the Victorian double moral standard that sanctioned women's behavior while favoring men's manners.

They insisted on the right of women to gain access to the educational realm, by promoting the enrollment of young girls in college, and fought also for women's access to the labor market, since the achievement of a higher education in conjunction with access to work could allow them to live a better and independent life. In order to spread their ideals, New Women feminists organized themselves in campaigns to claim new social reforms and, as Rotman points out, "equal-rights feminism rejected the domestic arena and embraced public politics as a vehicle for social changes" (Rotman 2006: 667).

The New Woman mobilization into politics made her associated also with the suffrage movement of the turn of the century. New Women suffragettes became active participants in the campaign for women's suffrage, fighting for the right to vote which was only restricted to men. Suffragettes differed by class, ethnicity, religion and political views. While white middle-class suffragettes adopted a more conservative stance, conceiving suffrage as a means for keeping white supremacy, African American women, who were instead excluded from joining white suffrage movements, founded their own organizations and used suffrage as a tool for fighting racism.

According to Ammons, "the issue of suffrage, which dramatically accelerated following the amalgamation in 1890 of the American Woman Suffrage Association and

the National Woman Suffrage Association, heated up existing, mainstream political debate about women and women's rights" (Ammons 1992: 5). From the end of the century, the NAWSA coordinated the national suffrage movement through campaigns and conventions and attended national press committees with the ultimate goal of winning the vote for women. As a suffragette, the New Woman was therefore involved in the political activism of her time and used suffrage as a vehicle to reform society, by playing a major role in asserting women's rights.

The female icon of the New Woman was also embodied by more licentious versions, such as those represented by the flappers. They started to appear on the American scene by the Twenties and were typically described as independent and unprincipled women, whose behavior was often the consequence of a life dedicated to extravagant pleasures. Their exaggerated use of alcohol and frequent love affairs made them similar to men in their way of life.

Young flappers represented a new idea of fashion, reflected by high heels shoes, short skirts and dresses revealing calves, all of which symbolizing the freedom that women claimed for themselves. They wore makeup, bobbed their hair and were usually pictured while holding a glass in hand, smoking a cigar, driving cars and chatting freely about sexual matters. By publicly displaying their libertine behaviors and their mobile life, these licentious New Women emphasized pleasure and sexual expression, identifying themselves as modern women who held an unconventional perspective on female sexuality and gender roles.

As the image below shows, the iconic flapper Clara Bow is portrayed while wearing short hair and a tight dress that shows her curves, highlighting thus her modern sexuality. This picture of the Roaring Twenties contrasted with the Victorian ideal of the obedient and respectable True Woman, making flappers a national obsession.

Figure 6. “Clara Bow”, *Bain News Service*, (1922). Courtesy of the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, D.C

Flapper’s changes in attitudes towards female sexuality marked a distance from the Victorian stereotypes of the submissive middle-class woman and gained an increasing popularity among the media, which, by the twenties, helped to promote the new fashionable lifestyle adopted by these female icons.

Of all the versions associated with the New Woman in the years that witnessed her development in the American society, the one which was most appreciated by the

general public as a representation of a kinder and delicate feminine ideal was that embodied by the Gibson Girl. Unlike her free-spirited contemporaries who aimed at changing the standard female image by challenging gender roles, this female icon embodied a more conservative version and forged a new beauty ideal in the American society of the end of the century.

The Gibson Girl was the incarnation of the white, middle-class and native-born American woman. She was described as a single, well-educated, intelligent woman, who enjoyed physical activities and a comfortable lifestyle. As a new appealing force within the American society, she promoted the image of an athletic, fashionable and independent woman, whose skills and beauty embodied the modernity of the US and its best democratic values.

The Gibson Girl symbolized a New Woman type that was definitely modern, but not too radical. She sought fulfillment and a degree of independence, but she never tried to overcome the boundaries of traditional feminine roles. While she introduced herself as a new modern public presence who promoted a more athletic and fashionable ideal, at the same time she retained the conventional gender expectations of women of her status.

Charles Dana Gibson, the creator of the Gibson Girl figure, illustrated in a famous poster the beauty and charm of this new modern female icon, creating a national fashion standard for American women. As the image below shows, the Gibson Girl is dressed in a shirtwaist and a bell-shaped skirt with a corseted waist, while confidently riding her bike. Her association with mobility helped to strengthen the idea of women's physical emancipation, making athleticism a central component of the Gibson Girl image.

Figure 7. Charles Dana Gibson, “Scribner’s for June”, *Scribner’s Magazine* (1895). Courtesy of the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, D.C.

As a product of popular press and magazines, this new female icon was also a commercialized image. She appeared in a multitude of consumer goods, including fashion accessories and furniture. According to Patterson, "the Gibson Girl embodied the values necessary to sustain a consumer-based economy: insatiable demand, purchasing power, and commodity discernment" (Patterson 2005: 32). At the end of the nineteenth century, the Gibson Girl was therefore depicted as a woman of bourgeois origins who was interested both in material products and appearance, embodying the symbol of American wealth, power and identity.

According to Patterson, while the New Woman "too often deferred or outright rejected her maternal obligation, the Gibson Girl offered assurances of eventual marriage and children" (Patterson 2005: 37). Since she believed in the value of marriage and in the preservation of the progress of the race, she could alleviate men's fears towards the dissolution of Victorian values, promoting thus the image of a woman attached to the family institution, as the illustration below shows.

Figure 8. Charles Dana Gibson, "Race Suicide", Illustration in *Everyday People* (1904). Courtesy of the University of Iowa.

In conclusion, from the end of the nineteenth century until the years before the Great Depression, the New Woman was a broad and complex phenomenon which led to the emergence of a new female icon. At times modern, consumerist, fashionable, but also masculine, revolutionary and radical, the New Woman represented *fin-de-siècle* women in a new light, different from the Victorian ones of previous generation and open to new transformations.

With the advent of the New Woman in the American society, while many felt threatened by her presence, for they believed in her ability to affect the stability of the status quo, others exalted her a source of inspiration for the ideals she stood for. Furthermore, the attempts made by the New Woman to change the understandings of women's role in society became the focus of many writers and journalists, who eventually made her a wide world cultural phenomenon.

Chapter Two

The Question of Women's Role in Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*

2.1 The Leisure Class: Display of Wealth and Objectification of Women in *The House of Mirth*

The American novel *The House of Mirth* was published in 1905 by the American author Edith Wharton. It narrates the social decline of Lily, a young single American woman who belongs to a disgraced family of the late-nineteenth century New York high society and who becomes a victim of the corrupt society in which she grew up and of the hypocrisies of the members who inhabit it. If on the one hand Lily's society promotes high moral standards, on the other it is also responsible for human decadence, since it generates vile and immoral members who reject and exclude all those who do not conform to it.

I chose to discuss this literary work in my thesis because Lily embodies the late nineteenth-century female figure involved in a phase of transition between two historical periods, one related to the conservative values promoted by the Cult of Domesticity of the nineteenth century, the other instead characterized by the advent of a consumerist modern culture, within which the cultural phenomenon of the New Woman flourished.

While on the one hand Lily retains the traits of the Victorian woman who aspires to marry a rich man and lead a life of riches, on the other she also adopts an unconventional attitude which leaves no room for compromises and reveals her desire for autonomy and freedom in making decisions that affect her own life, against the limitations imposed by the social cage in which she lives.

In *The House of Mirth*, Lily's story takes place within an elitist social context, properly defined as the leisure class. Leisure is a key word to identify this class, since, according to Maureen Montgomery, "the very notion of leisure implied that certain people had time in which to pursue activities that conferred gentility. It also signified

that such people did not have to engage in manual labor and that their time was not regulated by the demands of remunerative labor" (Montgomery 1998: 6).

The concept of an American leisure class emerged at the end of the nineteenth century, following the accumulation of riches produced by the phenomenon of industrialization which turned New York into the economic center of the whole country. The purpose of the members belonging to this class was to show off their wealth, which was mainly manifested through the care of the interior décor of their homes, the celebration of luxurious parties and the planning of expensive forms of entertainment.

An example is provided in chapter twelve of *The House of Mirth*, where we find an accurate description of the Wellington Brys' house, which is all set up for their official debut within the high society. The mansion is "as well-designed for the display of a festal assemblage as one of those airy pleasure-halls which the Italian architects improvised to set off the hospitality of princes" (Wharton 1993: 131-132), with "gilded walls, and the flushed splendours of the Venetian ceiling" (132). The classical décor surrounding the house, along with its furnishings, becomes thus an evidence of the Brys' wealth, whose main goal is to arouse amazement among the audience of the leisure class in order to facilitate their social climbing.

At the end of the nineteenth century, with the expansion of an increasingly consumerist society and the availability of new public spaces, the display of leisure was no longer solely confined to the domestic setting. Members of the upper class began, in fact, to publicly show their wealth and luxury by attending gala social events and theatrical performances, dining in fancy restaurants and traveling overseas. In *The House of Mirth*, in fact, high-society members are illustrated while going to the opera, attending the Monte Carlo Casino, dining in classy places, traveling to Europe and cruising on a yacht on the Mediterranean Sea.

Since upper class men were busy making money on Wall Street, women, according to Amy Kaplan, had "a dual role: to display the wealth and social power of their husbands and to conceal the source of this power" (Kaplan 1988: 93). The convenience of using new means of transportation made it easier for women to travel anywhere and many of them were seen strolling through the main streets while showing off expensive jewelry and refined clothing that their husbands could easily buy them. By the end of the nineteenth century, leisure-class women became exponents of fashion

and refinement and benefited from considerable publicity within society thanks to the spread of print media.

However, given such a world, the women who inhabit it start to function as commodities and acquire thus an ornamental value. In *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, the author Thorstein Veblen, focusing on the way women dress, reflects on the idea that they are considered as mere objects, as "servants to whom, in the differentiation of economic functions, has been delegated the office of putting in evidence their master's ability to pay" (Veblen 1899: 182).

This socially constructed female role is well represented in *The House of Mirth*, within which women belonging to the section of the society portrayed by Wharton are in competition with one another for the display of their husband's wealth. Lily, due to her beauty and the fact that she is still single, becomes a potential enemy of every married woman, since men would like to possess her and transform her into a consumer of their own wealth.

Lily cannot avoid being objectified, since both her beauty and the coquettish attitudes she adopts with men make her more vulnerable to objectification, leading men to the desire of possessing her, as if she were an estimated piece of art to add to their collection. Since the very beginning of the novel, Lily appears as an object to look at: the first impression of Lily spotted in the rush of the Grand Central Station, is provided by Selden Lawrence, whose "eyes had been refreshed by the sight of Miss Lily Bart" (Wharton 1993: 3) and who could not help but notice that she "always aroused speculation" (3), thus presenting her as an object of admiration and conjecture, but also, as the other meaning of the word implies, economic venture.

When Lily is having tea at Selden's apartment, the latter observes her and speculates on what makes her different from "the herd of her sex", thinking that "she must have cost a great deal to make, […] and a great many dull and ugly people must, in some mysterious way, have been sacrificed to produce her" (Wharton 1993: 5). Selden, as an expert connoisseur, observes Lily and wonders if it was "possible that she belonged to the same race" (Wharton 1993: 5), describing her as an art object, "as though a fine glaze of beauty and fastidiousness had been applied to vulgar clay" (5). Since the beginning of the novel, thus, according to Jennie Kassanoff, "*The House of Mirth* meticulously describes its heroine's eugenic superiority" (Kassanoff 2004: 43)

and “despite the appearance that Lily belongs to the “same race” […she] represents an exclusive, albeit imperiled race—at once superior and fatally overspecialized” (44).

Every man, including the social climber Simon Rosedale and the wealthy collector Percy Gryce conceive Lily as an object of interest and value her for her rarity. As Wharton says, Percy is interested in her because she looks like “a creature of a different race, [...] with all sorts of intuitions, sensations and perceptions that they [people like Percy] don’t even guess the existence of” (Wharton 1993: 48).

Rosedale is attracted to Lily because she looks like “an eternal rarity, an air of being impossible to match” (Wharton 1993: 299-300). Moreover, since Rosedale is in search of a wife who will “make all the other women feel small” (Wharton 1993: 176), he sees in Lily the one “who’ll hold her head higher the more diamonds [he puts] on it” (176). Lily is thus conceived as a woman “fashioned to adorn and delight” (Wharton 1993: 301), who, through her charm, beauty and family genealogy, will help Rosedale, a Jew and *nouveau riche*, reach the top of the social ladder.

In *The House of Mirth*, not only is Lily objectified by others but she also willingly objectifies herself, as “she had been brought up to be ornamental” (Wharton 1993: 297). Since her childhood, in fact, Lily’s mother raised her with the idea that her sole purpose in life was to become a precious object and taught her to rely on her beauty to marry a wealthy man and spend a well-off life. As Wharton says,

> Only one thought consoled her, and that was the contemplation of Lily’s beauty. She studied it with a kind of passion, as though it were some weapon she had slowly fashioned for her vengeance. It was the last asset in their fortunes, the nucleus around which their life was to be rebuilt. She watched it jealously, as though it were her own property and Lily its mere custodian; and she tried to instill into the latter a sense of the responsibility that such a charge involved. (Wharton 1993: 34)

Lily grows up with the idea that her identity depends on the degree of admiration reflected by the eyes of others, as she proves at the end of chapter four when comparing herself to Percy’s rare Americana collection. As Wharton writes, Lily wants in fact Mr. Gryce to purchase her and to be her beautiful trophy wife, and “she determined to be to him what his Americana had hitherto been: the one possession in which he took sufficient pride to spend money on it […] and she resolved so to identify herself with her husband’s vanity” (Wharton 1993: 49)

Another episode in which the author highlights Lily's tendency to objectify herself is revealed in chapter twelve, through her performance in the *tableaux vivants* scene at the Brys' party. Lily's representation of Reynolds's *Mrs. Lloyd*, appreciated for its beauty and for the sensuality to which she draws attention, gives her the possibility to outshine all the other women and allows men in the audience to observe and analyze her body outline almost without veils. As Wharton writes, "the unanimous "Oh!" of the spectators was a tribute, not to the brush-work of Reynolds's "Mrs. Lloyd" but to the flesh and blood loveliness of Lily Bart" (Wharton 1993: 134).

Figure 9. Sir Joshua Reynolds, "Mrs Richard Bennett Lloyd", (1775). Courtesy of The New York Review of Books.

By performing the posture of the woman portrayed in the painting above, Lily turns her body into a precious work of art, a sort of ornament that produces a temporary aesthetic pleasure for the male gaze, as Mr. Ned Van Alstyne makes explicit by commenting on Lily's appearance: "Deuced bold thing to show herself in that get-up; but, gad, there isn't a break in the lines anywhere, and I suppose she wanted us to know it!" (Wharton 1993: 135).

Here is a conscious choice. By displaying her body during the exhibition, Lily objectifies herself and leads the audience to think that she is accessible to everyone, giving men the impression that she is available to be viewed and collected. Yet she underestimates the risk involved in making this choice. Selden, however, seems the only one to realizes Lily's tragedy, namely the fact that she will always be looked at by a male gaze. As Wharton writes,

> It was not the first time that Selden had heard Lily's beauty lightly remarked on, and hitherto the tone of the comments had imperceptibly coloured his view of her. But now it woke only a motion of indignant contempt. This was the world she lived in, these were the standards by which she was fated to be measured!. (Wharton 1993: 135)

Selden, seeing Lily's performance, gets a different impression from the other spectators, because for the first time "he seemed to see before him the real Lily Bart, divested of the trivialities of her little world, and catching for a moment a note of that eternal harmony of which her beauty was a part" (Wharton 1993: 135). Nevertheless, this scene is veiled with irony, because even though Selden gets annoyed when he realizes that Lily is treated as if she were an object, much of his love for her depends upon her being a rare and precious thing.

In *The House of Mirth*, as illustrated in the episodes above, Lily embodies the stereotype of the upper-class woman who serves a decorative function which makes her a victim of the male-dominated milieu in which she lives, where appearances count more than anything else. As her name suggests, she is a flower of femininity, i.e. an object of desirability to the male element, and as such she is doomed to be commodified from birth and will never be able to be fully appreciated as an autonomous subject having her own identity.

However, in *The House of Mirth*, Wharton introduces two important female characters who detach themselves from the predetermined feminine role of being

regarded as simple commodities, representing instead a New Woman version who is economically independent and interested in changing society through her commitment. What differentiates these women, namely Gerty Farish and Carrie Fisher, from Lily is precisely the fact that they are women in charge of their lives and who are able to arrange it in a self-sufficient way, without the support or the need of a male figure.

In *The House of Mirth*, Gerty Farish is presented as a plain-looking, unkept and relatively poor woman who lives on the edges of the social ladder and who is distant from the circles of the high society, since she has no interest in being part of it. Because of her involvement in philanthropy, which she pursues by working for several charities, she embodies the genuine and independent New Woman version of the late nineteenth century, who is fully involved in her missionary work and rejects materialistic values.

Unlike upper-class women like Lily who engage in charity just for vanity and as a social duty, Gerty is moved by pure intentions, since she truly cares about people. When Lily donates three hundred dollars to Gerty's charity, Wharton ironically describes her act as follows:

> The satisfaction derived from this act was all that the most ardent moralist could have desired. Lily felt a new interest in herself as a person of charitable instincts. […] Moreover, by some obscure process of logic, she felt that her momentary burst of generosity had justified all previous extravagances, and excused any in which she might subsequently indulge. Miss Farish's surprise and gratitude confirmed this feeling, and Lily parted from her with a sense of self-esteem which she naturally mistook for the fruits of altruism. (Wharton 1993: 112)

Even though Lily's donation to Gerty's Club helps Nettie to be cured in a tuberculosis sanitarium, this action is only meant to make her feel good about herself and excuse her extravagance, while Gerty is a selfless person devoted to charitable causes and interested in the moral well-being of people.

Gerty cares about Lily and offers to calm and help her when the latter knocks at her doorstep in the middle of the night, even though she is aware that Selden, whom she is in love with, prefers Lily. She also feels that she has a moral claim on Lily, when she is worried that the latter is "cheapening herself" (Wharton 1993: 236), so to speak, by going out with people belonging to the lower classes. As Wharton writes, "Having once helped Lily, she must continue to help her; and helping her, must believe in her, because faith is the main-spring of such natures" (Wharton 1993: 236). She becomes thus both a

sort of a moral adviser and a maternal figure for Lily, who in turn finds a shelter in Gerty.

Finally, unlike Lily, Gerty has her own place, since she lives in a working-class apartment on her own, revealing thus a strong desire for independence, to which she is ready to sacrifice elegance and comfort. Even though Lily, at first, criticizes Gerty for her dingy dwelling by saying that "she has a horrid little place, and no maid, and such queer things to eat" (Wharton 1993: 7), she then realizes that she is just jealous of Gerty's freedom to live on her own, since she is forced to live with her aunt Mrs. Peniston because her refined taste cannot accept to be surrounded by ugliness.

Along with Gerty Farish, another relevant New Woman version described in the novel is the one embodied by Carry Fisher. She is a stalwart divorcée woman, who lives within the high society but adopts a detached point of view- which frees her from subjection to its rules. The fact that she had two divorces is not well-regarded by members of the upper class, since marriage represented one of the essential values on which society was based. Carry is, in fact, an autonomous woman who enjoys a different position than the women described in the society of *The House of Mirth*, since she does not need the economic help of a husband to get by on life and earns her living by helping people who aspire to reach the top of the social ladder. Moreover, together with Gerty Farish, Carry is another important figure in Lily Bart's life, since she tries to set Lily up in jobs which can help her to integrate into society, taking thus her as a protégée and becoming a sort of social guide for her.

In conclusion, since their birth, upper class women were only fated to cover the role of female adornments for men and were never taught any practical skills which could open them up to new job opportunities and help them to create their future. In order to be accepted by a male-dominated society based on appearances, they had to maintain the role of those who were worthy looking at and they could only do so through the economic support of a husband, becoming thus mere commodities to be displayed. Those women who, instead, refused to function as decorative creatures and considered themselves individuals with free agency, were mostly rejected by the social setting and eventually forced to live as outsiders.

2.2 The Theme of Marriage in *The House of Mirth*: Lily Bart's Struggle to Fit in the Role of Wife.

At the end of the nineteenth century, marriage was still considered the ultimate goal of women's life. In the society Wharton writes about, women are expected to marry for money, hence to a rich man who can guarantee them a comfortable life, but they are neither encouraged to marry for love nor to live an independent life.

In *The House of Mirth*, Lily Bart is a single woman of almost thirty years of age. She is still on the marriage market, and has reached an age in which finding an husband becomes urgent and increasingly difficult. Marriage is in fact conceived as a vocation for women, and in a context where they get married for money and social position, Lily too needs to marry a wealthy man to keep her social status and support her expensive habits.

Since the first chapter of the novel, Selden asks Lily, "Isn't marriage your vocation? Isn't it what you're all brought up for?" (Wharton 1993: 9), highlighting thus the fact that Lily and her likes have been raised with the idea of seeing marriage as the final aim of their life. Moreover, the social environment which Lily inhabits expects a woman "to be pretty and well-dressed" in order to get married, and since Lily meets both conditions, according to Mr. Ned Van Alstyne, her single status may become dangerous: "When a girl's as good-looking as that she'd better marry" (Wharton 1993: 157).

However, if on the one hand marriage was intended as a vocation for women, on the other it was considered an option for a man, as Lily points out to Selden by saying "a girl must [marry], a man may if he chooses" (Wharton 1993: 12). While Selden has the freedom to do whatever he likes with regard to marriage, Lily has "to calculate and contrive, and retreat and advance, as if [she] were going through an intricate dance, where one misstep would throw [her] hopelessly out of time" (Wharton 1993: 48).

As Wharton writes, Selden, unlike Lily, has the possibility to choose personal freedom instead of marriage, namely a freedom "from money, from poverty, from ease and anxiety, from all the material accidents" (Wharton 1993: 68), keeping thus "a kind of republic of the spirit" (68). The republic of the spirit, as Selden defines it, is a place free from high society's overwhelming expectations, but while Selden, as a man, can

choose to stay single and live as a bachelor in this realm of freedom, Lily, being a woman, is a "victim of the civilization which had produced her" (Wharton 1993: 7) and is left with no other options but to marry a wealthy man. Faced with this situation, therefore, Lily either conforms to social rules and get married, or loses her respectability and gets excluded from society.

In *The House of Mirth*, marriage is defined in monetary terms and becomes the only possible way for a woman to sustain a well-off lifestyle, since when a woman "can't keep it up alone, [she has] to go into partnership" (Wharton 1993: 12). Lily, at the age of almost thirty, attributes to marriage an economic value, linked to a materialistic conception of the male partner, who is not intended as a person to love, but merely as a financial object. As Gloria Erlich states, "Lily expects a husband to provide the sheltering walls, but not intimacy" (Erlich 1992: 52), which is the teaching she gets from her mother since she was a child.

Lily's mother had a deep influence on her daughter, since she saw marriage as a material convenience and treated her husband, Mr. Bart, only as a provider for her expensive clothes and connections with members of the upper class. However, when he could no longer support her habits due his financial ruin, "to his wife he no longer counted: he had become extinct when he ceased to fulfill his purpose; and she sat at his side with the provisional air of a traveler who waits for a belated train to start" (Wharton 1993: 33).

Thinking of marriage in economic terms, Lily shows an interest in marrying the affluent collector Percy Gryce, who can offer her financial protection and allow her to live comfortably among the members of high society, even though, as Carry Fisher says, "at heart, she despises the things she's trying for" (Wharton 1993: 189). Lily, in fact, struggles with the idea of marrying a boring man for whom she has no true affection, but she sees no other choice since she does not want to live in dinginess, or in her mother's words, "like a pig" (Wharton 1993: 30).

According to Shari Benstock, in order to be the perfect wife for Percy Gryce, Lily should follow the following rules: "no playing bridge for money, no cigarettes, and church services as if they were a regular part of her life" (Benstock 1994: 346), but she sabotages her chances to marry Mr. Gryce because she intentionally misses church service with him, loosing thus the possibility to farther develop their relationship.

In addition to Mr. Gryce, Lily has also the chance to get married with the wealthy banker Simon Rosedale, but despite his marital proposals towards her throughout the novel, she always refuses him because marrying a Jew would diminish her social status. However, when at the end of the novel Lily's fall from the social ladder makes her impoverished and in need of economic help, she decides to approach Rosedale and offers to marry him, who, instead, no longer desires to have her as his wife due to the rumors about her.

While she has no attraction for either Percy Gryce and Simon Rosedale, Lily loves Lawrence Selden, but she cannot marry him because he is not rich enough for the kind of life she wants. Lily could choose love and find happiness with him, but her obsession with wealth prevents her from accepting his love. As Wharton writes in chapter six, while Lily discusses with Selden the idea of marriage during a walk, even though she "admired him most of all, perhaps, for being able to convey as distinct a sense of superiority as the richest man she had ever met" (Wharton 1993: 65), Selden's disdain for the customs of the wealthy gives Lily the impression that she could never be happy by marrying him.

Even though Lily is obsessed with finding a rich husband who can allow her to live a life of leisure, she always sabotages all the marital proposals that she receives. Throughout the novel, in fact, she is never able to seize them or desire them so much as to put them into effect. One reason might be that, although Lily needs a man who can provide financially for her, she is incapable of marrying without love and consequently she feels divided between her desire and vocation.

Another explanation can be related to the excessive expectations that society puts on women, since according to Millicent Bell, "the more her financial and social circumstances demand marriage, […] the less responsive Lily is" (Bell 1995: 142-143). Living in a setting of rules of conduct, Lily feels suffocated and tries to rebel against the constrictions of patriarchal society. She does not want to feel as though she is an object in the hands of a man, but she longs for independence and freedom, to which however she is unable to sacrifice the material things she has been trained to desire.

Since the beginning of the novel, Lily's desire for freedom is expressed through her yearning to have a place of her own, which a woman like her can only possess if she gets married. While entering Selden's library, Lily says: "How delicious to have a place

like this all to one's self!" (Wharton 1993: 7), adding, "What a miserable thing is to be a woman" (7). Selden's opportunity to have a place for himself makes Lily more and more dissatisfied with her own social status, since she is a "poor, miserable, marriageable" (Wharton 1993: 7) girl who cannot enjoy the privilege of having a home of her own, and wishes to have the same opportunities as Selden, namely to choose her own life.

When Selden points out to Lily that there are women, such as for example his cousin Gerty Farish, who have their own flat, Lily interrupts him, claiming that Gerty can live alone and be free because she is unmarriageable. Since Lily, on the contrary, is a beautiful and marriageable woman, the only way she can get a house of her own to decorate to her taste is through marriage.

However, since Lily has no income or inheritance left from her parents, she is forced to live with her aunt Mrs. Peniston, relying sometimes on the hospitality of her friends. Lily feels suffocated by Mrs. Peniston's drawing room, "as though she was buried alive in the stifling limits of [her aunt's] existence" (Wharton 1993: 100) and believes that if she could have the possibility to do over her aunt's drawing room, she "should be a better woman" (8).

She conceptualizes the house as an externalization of herself, as a way through which she can express her personality. The old-fashioned house of Lily's aunt, "dreary as a tomb" (Wharton 1993: 100), reflects the stiffness of the old patriarchal society within which Mrs. Julia Peniston was born, and which contrasts with the new world of consumption of the New York setting at the turn of the century, preventing thus Lily from expressing herself, since she wishes for a more modern environment that can highlight her beauty.

In conclusion, Lily's refusal to marry can be traced back to her unconscious desire to rebel against the patriarchal norms that relegate women to their husband's dependence and to her disdain for the price she would pay if she agreed to marry. Although her longing for freedom and autonomy cannot be realized within a society based on gender inequality, Lily, as a New Woman, shows a certain inclination to change her status at a time when the old conservative values of the nineteenth century were giving way to new modern ideals.

2.2.1 The Definition of Reputation in The House of Mirth: Breaking the Rules of Acceptable Behavior

Lily Bart, as an unmarried woman living in a patriarchal society, is expected to behave according to social rules if she wants to keep a good reputation and be respected by the members of her own circle. However, her refusal to marry and her rebellious behavior put her in risky situations, which result in the spreading of gossip about her moral conduct.

From the very beginning of the novel, Lily's brief visit to Selden's apartment puts her in a perilous situation since it was unusual for an unmarried woman to be seen while leaving a building of bachelors' apartments, breaking thus the rule of what was considered as acceptable behavior for women. While Lily is getting out of Selden's apartment, she is seen first by a char-woman, whose "persistent gaze implied a groping among past associations" (Wharton 1993: 14), meaning that, according to Erlich "she is placing Lily among loose women who visit men's apartments" (Erlich 1992: 72). She is then seen by Simon Rosedale, who is the owner of the facility and offers to give her a ride to the train station. She naively and hurriedly refuses Rosedale's proposal, which, indeed, "might have purchased his silence" (Wharton 1993: 15) preventing thus any kind of rumors.

In chapter thirteen, Lily Bart is faced with another dangerous situation, since she is seen while leaving Gus Trenor's house in the middle of the night. The previous evening, during the Wellington Brys' party, Gus Trenor is impressed by Lily's performance in the *tableaux vivants* scene and considering his help in investing her money on the stock market, he now expects from her a sexual favor in return. By accepting Gus's financial help, Lily puts herself in a bad position, since she is aware that a form of repayment may be expected. She flirts with him in order to arouse his sympathies, believing that she can "hold him by his vanity" (Wharton 1993: 85) and prevent thus sexual intimacy with him.

When Gus, under false pretenses, invites Lily into his house, he tries to manipulate her and get her closer to him, but Lily does not compromise and as soon as she can she runs away from his mansion. After leaving his house, Lily feels terrible at the thought of having possibly been seen. When she comes to understand more clearly

the nature of her financial arrangement with Gus Trenor, namely the fact that the money she received came from Gus's own funds rather than from the investments he made for her, she questions her reputation, which according to David Holbrook, "has become such that she is generally suspected of getting money from men by giving favours" (Holbrook 1991: 31) and seeks refuge in Gerty's house, feeling ashamed and guilt.

She considers herself as a "bad—a bad girl" (Wharton 1993: 164), feeling as if she sold herself for money and comparing herself to a prostitute, and tells Gerty that she has "sunk lower than the lowest" (Wharton 1993: 166). Until that moment at Gus' house, Lily believed she was in control of her sexuality, but she has to reevaluate her attitude when her naïve flirtations with Mr. Trenor almost lead to her rape. She eventually assumes all the moral responsibility for the abuse she was about to suffer and knows that she has to pay her debt in order to redeem herself.

The gossip around Lily and Mr. Trenor shocks Mrs. Peniston, since the alleged violation of Lily's sexual probity before marriage is an expression of inappropriate behavior which cannot be tolerated within a male-dominated society. Mrs. Peniston has eventually to disinherit Lily, leaving her "with a small legacy" (Wharton 1993: 270) since the frivolous attitude attributed to the latter risks, by extension, to question the reputation of the aunt herself, who therefore cannot afford to run into social disapproval among her circle of elitist friends.

In addition to Mrs. Julia Peniston, these whisperings concerning Lily's suspicious affair with Mr. Trenor affect also her friend Selden Lawrence. He saw Lily leaving Trenor's house, assuming the worst, and despite his profound admiration for her, eventually judges her according to appearances and gives credit to the rumors circulating around her.

At the beginning of Book Two, Lily accepts Bertha's invitation to go on a cruise trip on the Mediterranean Sea, in the hope of leaving what she went through behind her shoulders. However, she engages again in an imprudent situation for her reputation, since Lily's presence on the Dorsets' yacht takes the form of a social exchange. In order to maintain her social status among members of the leisure class, Bertha Dorset requires her to divert Mr. Dorset from his wife's extra-marital affair with the young scholar Ned Silverton.

When Mrs. Dorset's adulterous relationship is about to be discovered, in order to divert the attention from her conduct, she accuses Lily of having an affair with her husband, publicly humiliating her and trashing her reputation. Mrs. Dorset is one of the female characters in *The House of Mirth* who takes advantage of Lily's vulnerability to ruin her reputation within the society and she is able to do it because she has money and power, as Lily explains to Miss Farish: "it's a great deal easier to believe Bertha Dorset's story than mine, because she has a big house and an opera box, and it's convenient to be on good terms with her" (Wharton 1993: 226).

Moreover, Lily's naivety in keeping company to her friend's husband put her inevitably at the center of indiscretions, since "the truth about any girl is that once she's talked about she's done for; and the more she explains her case the worse it looks" (Wharton 1993: 226). She misjudges both the consequences of her involvement in the harmful game played by wealthy people and the alluring signals that unintentionally she sends to married men.

Lily's bad reputation based on a false rumored affair leads all the other upper-class members to reject her, as Gerty Farish reveals to Selden: "Judy Trenor and her own family have deserted her too--and all because Bertha Dorset has said such horrible things" (Wharton 1993: 269-270). Even Simon Rosedale, who is in love with Lily, cannot marry her due the alleged rumor, since it would damage his reputation. As Rosedale explains to Lily, "the quickest way to queer yourself with the right people is to be seen with the wrong ones; and that's the reason I want to avoid mistakes" (Wharton 1993: 256). He offers to marry her only if she regains her position within the high society, otherwise, if he accepted to marry her now "[he'd] queer [himself] for good and all, and everything [he has] worked for all these years would be wasted" (Wharton 1993: 256).

Rosedale's words express the idea that the act of engaging with a woman who has been rejected from society due her bad reputation can only jeopardize his ambition to reach the top of the social ladder. The only way Lily can solve the situation that she ended up in is by blackmailing Bertha Dorset with her letters, but Lily, who is different from the cruel members of the New York setting, decides instead to burn them, acting thus as a moral woman who resists the corruption of society.

In *The House of Mirth*, Wharton shows that if on the one hand Lily's misconduct can be attributed to a degree of naivety that distinguishes her from the malicious members of the upper class and entraps her into a corrupt system that suffocates her, on the other hand she knows the effect she has on men and uses deliberately her beauty to her advantage. As a New Woman aware of her sexuality, she displays her sensuality in order to attract men, but when they are about to propose to her she interrupts the flirtation preventing them from exercising physical control over her. Lily is, in the fact, very careful about not falling into any compromises and refuses to be involved in extra-marital relationships, contrary to other characters in the novel.

In conclusion, since there is no room in society for women like Lily who try to challenge social norms by pushing the boundaries of what is considered as acceptable conduct, she is punished by her social circle and ends up being treated as a sexual opponent and eventually excluded from her social environment.

2.3 Lily Bart's Transformation in *The House of Mirth*: From the Rise to the Fall Down the Social Ladder

In *The House of Mirth*, Wharton describes Lily's fall from the ranks of the wealthy social class to a lonely life on the margins of society. She becomes the tool of the author's attack on a morally corrupt upper class, which feigns to celebrate high moral standards while instead dehumanizing its members and obliging them either to conform or to be destroyed. According to Benstock, this is "the result of her being born into a patriarchal world in which a woman is pinned down, transmogrified into a static art object if she is beautiful, and has to be married" (Benstock 1994: 415), and since Lily cannot survive within a frivolous society which celebrates women as purely ornamental objects, she gets pushed out and left on her own.

The transformation that Lily experiences throughout the novel, from the first book to the second one, shows how she goes from being a snobbish and superficial woman, who enjoys the luxuries of the rich New York society, to a righteous and moral person, who develops also a stronger sense of communion with those around her.

At first, Lily's upper-class friends put her in a position to be admired and adorned, by providing her with expensive clothes and inviting her to their fancy parties.

Then, when Lily keeps failing to make a good marriage and finds herself caught in the middle of a series of risky situations which cheapen her reputation, she starts being rejected by everyone and forced to face her fall. However, if on the one hand her fall from the social ladder constitutes a loss of her social status, on the other it coincides instead with her rise in self-worth and morality. According to Carol Wershoven, Lily's gradual descent down the social ladder, "ends in a great triumph: the attainment of the "real" Lily, the transformation of a genuine, human self" (Wershoven 1982: 72), which would not occur if she had maintained her initial social status.

By the end of the novel, Lily accomplishes several noble actions that make her a good person. First, while she is visiting Selden's apartment, she burns Bertha's letters which serve as hard evidence of her adultery and may constitute Lily's weapon to be admitted again into the society. By avoiding blackmailing Bertha with her letters, Lily spares Selden's reputation and proves her inability to behave in a way that is contrary to her moral principles.

In addition, the night before her death, after receiving the estate check from her aunt, Lily immediately writes a check for the full amount of nine thousand dollars owed to Gus Trenor, remaining with only one thousand in her pocket. When Selden, the day after, looks over her check stubs and finds it, he realizes that Lily could not stand the moral weight of owing money to Gus, and for this sense of duty, he admires her even more.

The change that Lily undergoes by the end of the novel reflects her awareness that she would not be happy in a society which forces women to marry well and celebrates them according to their decorative value. In particular, she thanks Selden for having made her aware of that reality by telling him: "I remembered your saying that such a life could never satisfy me; and I was ashamed to admit to myself that it could. That is what you did for me--that is what I wanted to thank you for" (Wharton 1993: 308).

Lily realizes that she is trapped by the social conventions of her period and cannot easily escape her fate as a woman living in a patriarchal environment. According to Elsa Nettels, "given the vulnerability of women whose status depends on the decisions of men, it is notable that such women in Wharton's fiction […] are more willing to break taboos" (Nettels 1997: 98). Indeed, Lily does not want to fulfill the

predetermined role of wife and aims instead to keep her agency and be an independent woman, but there is no place for women like her in society. This makes her feel powerless and voiceless, as she reveals to Selden by saying: “I have tried hard--but life is difficult, and I am a very useless person. I can hardly be said to have an independent existence. I was just a screw or a cog in the great machine I called life, and when I dropped out of it I found I was of no use anywhere else” (Wharton 1993: 308).

In conclusion, Lily’s awareness of the hypocrisy of the members of high society and the realization that she is incapable of contrasting it, leaves her with no alternative than committing suicide. Her death represents the final gesture through which she stops suffering and ceases being an outsider cast out of society, and the act of taking the chloral alone in her room represent the ultimate escape from it. As a New Woman, therefore, Lily fails in the novel for her lack of autonomy since she chooses to kill herself, but succeeds in retaining her identity and moral dignity by refusing to compromise her moral values in order to be accepted by society.

Chapter Three

The New Woman in Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*: Carrie Meeber as the *Femme Fatale* in the Consumer Society of the Late Nineteenth Century

3.1 Carrie Meeber: The Birth of the *Femme Fatale* in Dreiser's Novel *Sister Carrie*

Sister Carrie is an American novel written by Theodore Dreiser and published in 1900. It is the story of Carrie Meeber, a young country girl who decides to move to the big city of Chicago, where her sister Minnie lives, in the hope of living her own American dream and turning her life around. By acting as a mistress to wealthy and good-looking men, who can afford to offer her whatever she longs for, and working her way up the social ladder through her beauty and sensual manners, she is eventually able to become a famous Broadway star and realize thus her own dreams.

I chose to discuss this novel in my thesis because Carrie embodies the female figure of the modern and materialistic woman typical of the consumer society of the late nineteenth century, within which wealth and social status are the indexes through which people are classified and identified. In *Sister Carrie*, Carrie represents in particular a fatal and transgressive version of the New Woman, defined primarily as *femme fatale*. According to Rebecca Stott, the *femme fatale* is a fictional type of woman who "is not unique to the nineteenth century, but she is fabricated, reconstructed in [...] the cultural expressions of the closing years of the century. She is a powerful and threatening figure, bearing a sexuality that is perceived to be rapacious, or fatal to her male partners" (Stott 1992: viii).

The female archetype by definition of the romantic myth of the *femme fatale* is the biblical figure of Salome, defined as the irresistible and destructive woman, corrupt and innocent at the same time. She uses her seductive power generated by her dance to attract men and manipulate them, in order to make them do what she desires. In the painting below, Salome is depicted in an erotic pose while performing an exotic dance. In the background, a black servant holds John the Baptist's head on a platter, whose

beheading was asked by Salome to her stepfather Herod who was charmed by her dance. Through this painting, Franz von Stuck evokes thus the biblical myth that made popular for centuries the image of Salome as a fatally tempting woman.

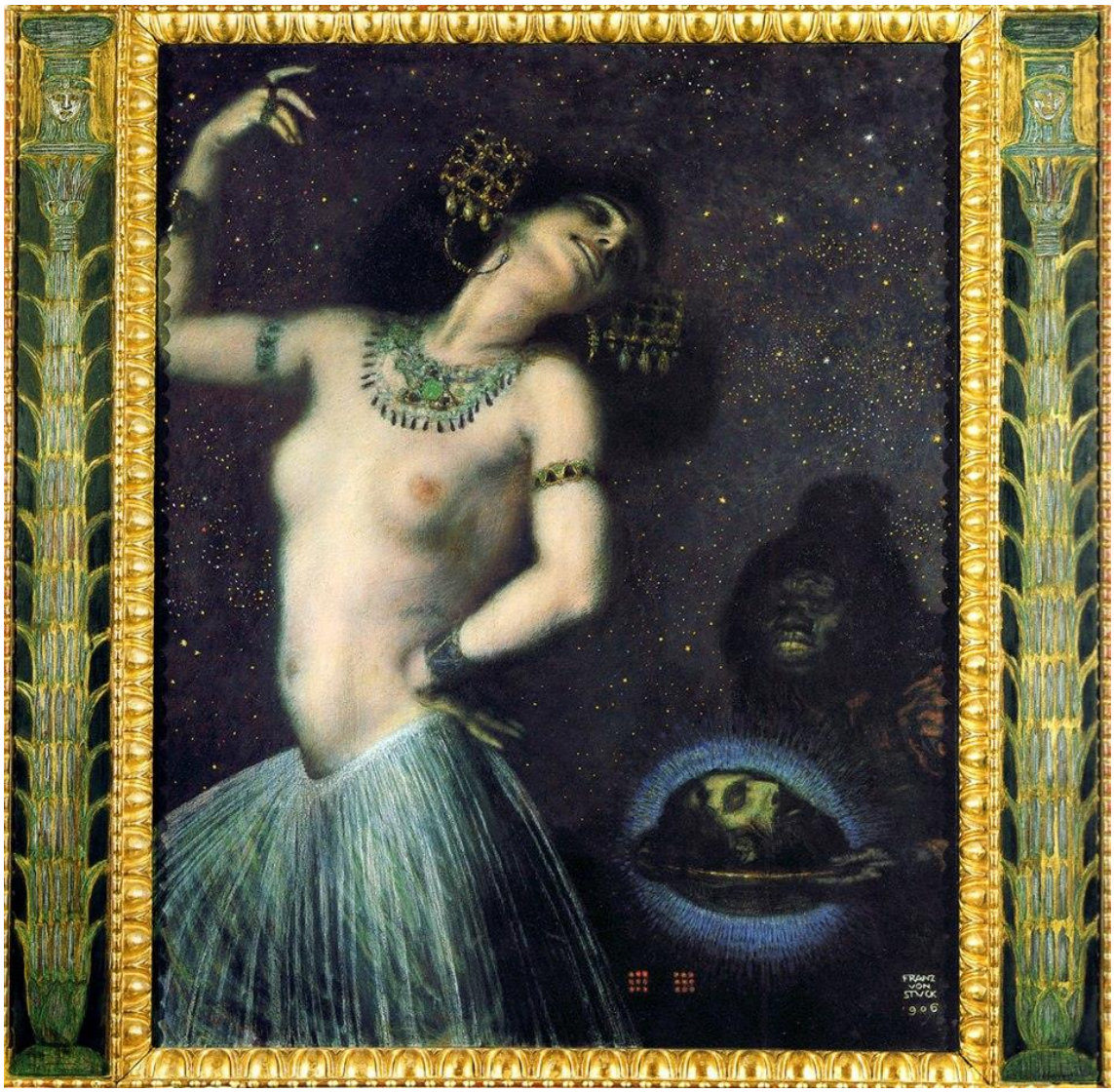

Figure 10. Franz von Stuck, “Salome Dancing”, (1906). Courtesy of the Lenbachhaus Museum.

In the novel, Carrie, as a true representative of the *femme fatale*, is described as a purely ambitious, determined and self-centered woman, who uses her charms and beauty to manipulate men, for whom she lacks feelings, treating them as means through which she can fulfill her desires and succeed in life. The evolution of the *femme fatale* in Carrie is not instantaneous, but rather progressive, since she is initially presented as a

naive girl who comes to Chicago without bad intentions, but then gradually she turns into a deceiver who manages to delude men around her, since they represent for her the opportunity to reach her goals and overcome her miserable social status.

In the first chapter, the author describes Carrie as a poor country girl—whose "total outfit consisted of a small trunk, which was checked in the baggage car, a cheap imitation alligator skin satchel holding some minor details of the toilet, a small lunch in a paper box and a yellow leather snap purse, containing her ticket, a scrap of paper with her sister's address in Van Buren Street, and four dollars in money" (Dreiser 1994: 3)—who moves to Chicago full of hopes and expectations for a better future.

While she is on the train bound for Chicago she meets the drummer Charles Drouet, i.e. a travelling salesman, whose "good clothes, of course, were the first essential, the things without which he was nothing. A strong physical nature, actuated by a keen desire for the feminine, was the next" (Dreiser 1994: 6). Dreiser introduces Drouet as a man of fine manners who embraces the materialistic values of the modern city and which deeply affect Carrie, who believes that his clothes say something about who he is. She is, in fact, attracted by this "masher" (Dreiser 1994: 5), with his self-assured manner and flashy clothes, and starts a conversation with him during her first trip from Columbia City to Chicago.

While they discuss, she notices that Drouet wears nicer clothes than hers and this makes her "conscious of an inequality. Her own plain blue dress with its black cotton tape trimmings realized itself to her imagination as shabby. She felt the worn state of her shoes" (Dreiser 1994: 7). Moreover, when Drouet mentions to Carrie some of the most remarkable sights in Chicago, she feels "a little ache in her fancy of all he described" (Dreiser 1994: 7). As Donald Pizer underlines, Carrie's "feelings of inferiority at the glitter of Drouet's presence suggest the equally strong sense of unworthiness in her personality" (Pizer 1991: 28). This sense of inequality arouses in her, for the first time, unconscious desires to possess the same nice things that Drouet has, but she realizes that she needs to have money in order to fulfill her wishes.

Soon after parting at the train station, Carrie accidentally runs again into Drouet while she is looking for a job and he offers to help her by giving her twenty dollars to buy new clothes for the winter, assuring her that it is just a loan. At first Carrie seems to have second thoughts about whether to take them, but since she needs them she accepts

his offer. As Carrie realizes that Drouet is helpful and really seems to care about her, she starts to profit from him, thinking in materialistic terms, as the narrator writes:

> As for Carrie, her understanding of the moral significance of money was the popular understanding, nothing more. The old definition, "Money: something everybody else has and I must get," would have expressed her understanding of it thoroughly. Some of it she now held in her hand, two soft, green ten-dollar bills, and she felt that she was immensely better off for the having of them. It was something that was a power in itself. (Dreiser 1994: 62)

It is on this moment that we see the emergence of the *femme fatale* in Carrie, who realizes that Drouet, as a well-off and generous man, is the one who can help her buy all the clothes she longs for and enjoy "the keener pleasures of life" (Dreiser 1994: 4). After Carrie takes Drouet's money, he establishes her in a furnished room of his own, and after several dates together the two start a relationship and move to a larger apartment.

From this point onward, Carrie begins to purchase expensive dresses that fit her well and products that accentuate her good-looking appearance, becoming increasingly aware of the power that her beauty has on Drouet, who gives her whatever she wants. As Dreiser writes, "With his money she purchased the little necessaries of toilet until at last she looked quite another maiden. The mirror convinced her of a few things which she had long believed. She was pretty, yes indeed. How nice her hat set, and weren't her eyes pretty?" (Dreiser 1994: 75-76).

With the awareness that Drouet is an extremely charming man who likes to play the role of the womanizer, Carrie tries to match his tastes and preferences in women through her looks, since she wants to keep him by her side. She realizes, in fact, that by trying to look more and more like the woman who Drouet wants her to be, she will gain more from it herself.

Even though she feels only little sexual attraction to Drouet, Carrie cares to please him because she sees no other choice for improving her life, since she does not want to go back to her miserable status as a country girl or to her previous job as a working girl in a shoe factory. She has now the possibility to get everything she longs for and she does not want to lose this chance.

In her relationship with Drouet, Dreiser presents Carrie as a naive woman who is interested in a man who likes to have control over her. Even though at the beginning she

resists his advances and his attempts to conquer her through his money, Carrie is increasingly intrigued by Drouet and is willing to start a relationship with him, but believes also that it is inappropriate for an unmarried woman to have an affair with a man.

Since marriage constitutes a form of social respectability and economic security, she wants to get married mostly for the sake of appearances. Drouet, however, only pretends he is married with Carrie, since he has no interest in making their relationship official, and when Carrie asks him why they are still not married he gives her the excuse that he has to seal an important property deal before thinking about marriage.

Carrie, who is getting a little bored with Drouet's unreliable behavior, is thus faced with a crossroads: she either agrees to continue her relationship with Drouet as his mistress, enjoying all the riches and commodities that he can offer her, or she leaves him and goes back to her previous miserable life with the her sister Minnie and Sven Hanson, her brother-in-law. Faced with the drastic possibility of losing everything that she has ever dreamed of, she decides to carry on her affair with Drouet thus silently submitting to his conditions.

Carrie is therefore depicted as a passive woman who agrees to depend on Drouet's riches even though in her heart she does not harbor deep feelings or a strong passion for him. Indeed, Carrie, as a novice *femme fatale* who has discovered her inner power to manipulate the male sex through her charm, simulates her interest in Drouet, making him believe that he has conquered her while taking advantage of his status to get whatever she wants. The relationship between the two is thus not made of true feelings but is mostly based on material convenience.

The evidence of lack of real feelings between Carrie and Drouet comes when the latter, for the first time, introduces Carrie to George Hurstwood, who represents for her a better opportunity to catch, leading thus the relationship between the girl and the drummer to fade. As Dreiser writes about Hurstwood,

> [He was] pointed out as a very successful and well-known man about town. Hurstwood looked the part, for besides being slightly under forty, he had a good stout constitution, an active manner and a solid substantial air, which was composed in part of his fine clothes, his clean linen, his jewels, and, above all, his own sense of his importance. (Dreiser 1994: 43)

Compared to Drouet, Hurstwood is wealthier and has a higher social status, just below the top of the social ladder. Moreover, while Drouet, through his dresses and tales about his trips is mostly showing off, pretending to be someone he is not, Hurstwood "had risen by perseverance and industry" (Dreiser 1994: 43), so he is a man whose hard work allowed him to become truly rich and successful.

Carrie regards Hurstwood as the man who can better satisfy her needs, since as Pizer underlines, she "measures [men's] worth in direct proportion to their ability to provide her with the food, shelter, clothing, and pleasures that were missing during her early years" (Pizer 1991: 32). Moreover, as Richard Lingeman states, "Carrie intuits that her body, […] is a commodity, and she had better barter it to the kindest bidder, who at the time is Hurstwoood" (Lingeman 1993: 142). While in Dreiser's novel Carrie is aware that her body is something she can trade with in order to get what she wants, in Wharton's *The House of Mirth*, despite people accuse Lily of selling her body during her performance in the *tableaux vivants*, she actually uses it as a work of art, unaware then that she is objectifying herself.

Since Hurstwood can provide Carrie with a more sophisticated and luxurious lifestyle, she leaves Drouet in a frivolous way, without giving it too much thought. Indeed, Carrie's individual interests come before people's needs or feelings, and this is what characterizes her as the self-centered, ambitious version of the New Woman of her time.

The proof that Carrie only thinks about what is best for her, showing disinterest towards others' feelings, is provided by her choice to start the relationship with Hurstwood when she is still involved with Drouet. Right from the first encounters, at Drouet's apartment before and at the theatre later, the flirting between the two increases, until it gets deeper and deeper. In particular, when Drouet is out of town on business, Hurstwood takes the opportunity to spend as much time as possible alone with Carrie, getting to the point of planning to meet at the park and then run away together and get married.

By acting as an unfaithful woman and pretending to have real feelings for Hurstwood only to have access to his money and position, Carrie assumes the revolutionary attitude of the New Woman of the late nineteenth century, who finds herself "in a state of mental rebellion" (Dreiser 1994: 55) and does not accept to bow to

the prescribed social norms imposed upon her, thinking only about the realization of her happiness, the things she wants to possess and the elitist position she wants to achieve.

With these thoughts on her mind, Carrie moves to New York with Hurstwood and, as Lingeman points out, "she adapts to her new circumstances, living quietly as a young matron known as 'Mrs. Wheeler' […], passing idle hours with trashy novels, supervising her maid at the housework, or cooking dinner for her husband" (Lingeman 1993: 146), waiting silently to reveal her true unconventional nature while Hurstwood takes advantage of a business opportunity and starts managing a saloon. Contrary to Carrie, who becomes an opportunist able to adapt to any circumstances in order to get what she longs for, according to Caren Town, in *The House of Mirth* Wharton shows that Lily "consistently misinterprets what she sees. Unlike Carrie, she is tragically confident in her ability to read her world and feels little necessity to adapt what she believes to be her essential (and inviolate) self to it" (Town 1994: 46), becoming at the end a victim of her own civilization.

When Hurstwood's work progressively takes a turn for the worse, he finds himself out of work. Carrie exhorts him to find another job, but he has no luck and day after day he gets increasingly demoralized by the burden of debts that he has not yet managed to repay. This leads Hurstwood to idle around the house and his laziness slowly starts to irritate Carrie, who wonders why he decided to marry her and thus provide for her since he does not seem motivated to find a job. As Dreiser underlines,

> She could not understand what had gotten into the man. He had some money, he had a decent suit remaining, he was not bad-looking when dressed up. She did not forget her own difficult struggle in Chicago, but she did not forget either that she had never ceased from trying. He never tried. He did not even consult the ads in the papers any more. (Dreiser 1994: 365)

Carrie is pretty upset about their financial situation, especially when she discovers that Hurstwood stopped giving her money to spend it instead on expensive dinners in fancy hotels and at poker. Therefore, she realizes that she can no longer rely on her husband and she is worried about the unwanted possibility of returning to live on the verge of poverty, after she had the chance to have a taste of the wealthy life in New York. According to John J. McAleer, "she had responded to Drouet's overtures because her

whole nature protested the grinding woes of poverty. She will not accept those woes now" (McAleer 1968: 77).

Faced with this situation, Carrie starts to take on a more prominent role in the couple and make decisions on her own, rebelling against her previous role as a passive and submissive housewife. She begins to look for a job in order to improve their miserable financial situation and tries to find any acting part that can allow her to earn some money. According to Amy Kaplan, Carrie realizes that "while she was ashamed in Chicago to be looked at and labeled as a job-seeker, in New York her looks have become the only commodity she has to sell" (Kaplan 1988: 156). Hurstwood initially does not like this idea because he fears that she will succeed and leave him, so he insults Carrie by telling her that she is not good enough to make it as an actress in New York.

Hurstwood's words, however, do not discourage Carrie, who is increasingly convinced that she will be able to find someone interested in offering her a job. She buys thus a newspaper to find some theatrical agents to turn to, but each of those with whom she has an interview with is negatively impressed by her short acting resume and advises her to gain a little more experience by participating in some small local production.

Despite the difficulty of finding an acting job, Carrie continues to try few more theatres, until she manages to meet with the manager of a theatre on Broadway, known as the Casino. She gets a part in the chorus and starts earning money, which makes her feel very excited and empowered, while Hurstwood seems more and more unconcerned about finding a job, as the author writes:

> He seemed to get nothing to do, and yet he made bold to inquire how she was getting along. The regularity with which he did this smacked of some one who was waiting to live upon her labor. Now that she had a visible means of support this irritated her. He seemed to be depending upon her little twelve dollars. (Dreiser 1994: 392)

In the light of this new twist in her life, she begins to neglect her role as a housewife, focusing more on herself and the things she wants to reach. First, when she goes home from the theatrical rehearsals she still wants to practice her dance moves for the show and she feels quite annoyed that she has to stop practicing in order to make dinner for Hurstwood. As a result, she decides that she is not going to do that anymore and he will need to work things out for himself. Then, as Carrie's aspirations as an actress start to

come true and her earnings increase, she decides to spend money on shopping rather than giving it to her husband and begins to hang out more often with Lola Osburne, her new friend of the chorus, to avoid seeing him.

When Carrie obtains an even better role in the play, which comes with a much bigger salary, she decides to move together with Lola, leaving Hurstwood for good. She starts reading the theatrical papers, and dreams of opening up one of those magazines and seeing herself mentioned someday, until one day she does. Carrie has in fact managed to achieve success. Her fame as a rising-star has reached such high levels that she gets her own dressing room and even succeeds in stealing the show to one of the most famous stars of the play for which she auditioned. She is suddenly surrounded by new friends and receives letters from men who want to marry her. At the end, Carrie gets more and more publicity in the newspapers and realizes her dream to see her image depicted in the huge billboards of New York.

In *Sister Carrie*, Dreiser shows that even for a young village girl, who arrives in the big city expecting to realize her dreams, it is possible to pursue the American Dream. By leaving her family Carrie hoped for a brighter future ahead of her and through her ambition and determination she achieves it, becoming thus a true representative of the modern New Woman of the late nineteenth century.

In parallel with the rise of Carrie from rags to riches, Dreiser describes also Hurstwood's fall down the social ladder. While at the beginning of the novel, he is depicted as a man whose place in society is just below the top of the social ladder and who has everything he could ever dream of, when he moves to New York with Carrie he loses the power to control the situation. He tries to reach for more, but he always fails and starts feeling emasculated since Carrie has to provide for both of them. Even though this situation strengthens Carrie's ego, it weakens Hurstwoods', who gradually loses the self-confidence that made it seem so decisive in Carrie's eyes, eventually ending up in despair.

In conclusion, the economic independence that Carrie gradually acquires throughout the novel helps her to release herself from the social restrictions of her old background and to become a free and independent woman. In a late-nineteenth-century context, where the majority of women was still dependent on their husband and submitted to their authority, Carrie becomes the unconventional woman representative

of reversal of gender roles. She is, in fact, the one who earns money through her job career and provides for both, while Hurstwood becomes increasingly dependent on her, until he is completely abandoned and forced to live like a beggar on the street.

Not only is Carrie portrayed as a revolutionary woman, but the novel itself was considered groundbreaking at the time of its publication. According to Alfred Kazin and Charles Saphiro, the novel was considered "immoral because the heroine did not suffer 'the wages of sin'" (Kazin & Saphiro 1955: 182). The implied sexuality carried out outside of marriage was in fact judged as an immoral matter and as such a reprehensible conduct to be condemned. Therefore, in the final chapters of *Sister Carrie* Theodore Dreiser was expected to punish the immorality of his heroine, as it traditionally happened in novels about unconventional women but the author, instead, ended his novel by describing the final achievement of her longed-for success, depicting thus Carrie as an independent woman who everybody looked up on.

3.1.1 Carrie as an Actress: Playing a Role both in Theatre and in Real Life

In *Sister Carrie*, the theatre plays a key role in Carrie's life, as it represents the means through which she succeeds in fulfilling her desires, becoming a famous Broadway star admired by everyone. During her theatrical experience, Carrie realizes that she is very good at acting, as she manages to enchant the audience through her moves and natural frown, which gentlemen "would have loved to force away with kisses" (Dreiser 1994: 447). In particular, as Pizer states, the ability that Carrie shows in captivating the audience derives in fact from "an 'emotional greatness' that gives imaginative expression to the world's common sorrows" (Pizer 1991: 36).

The self-awareness that Carrie acquires thanks to her talent in seducing the audience, which "the more it studied her, the more it indicated its delight" (Dreiser 1994: 447), makes her a smart *femme fatale* who, through the keen use of her charm and beauty, has the ability to exercise control over people's emotions by offering, as Kaplan points out, "a version of herself for the consumption of an audience without being touched or consumed by them" (Kaplan 1988: 157).

One of Carrie's most persuasive moments in the theatre occurs when she is asked to play the role of Laura in the melodrama *Under the Gaslight*, where she

impersonates a young girl whose story is very similar to hers. Laura, adopted by a wealthy woman, is discovered to be the daughter of a disreputable man, and as such she risks being excluded from society. According to Dreiser, "this part affected Carrie deeply. It reminded her somehow of her own state" (Dreiser 1994: 163). Carrie, as Laura, is a pretender and is worried that society might consider her an outcast "upon finding that she was [...] a nobody by birth" (Dreiser 1994: 167).

Carrie's identification with Laura's character and her ability to convey the pathos of the melodrama fills men with sexual desire, making thus the theatre a stage for desire and seduction. Moreover, the art of seduction which Carrie uses to deceive the audience she plays for, is displayed also in real life, since she uses her charm to manipulate the men with whom she engages in order to gain access to the top ranks of the social ladder, as her affairs with Drouet first and Hurstwood later confirm.

With both these men Carrie initially plays the role of the passive and submissive housewife, who is devoted to her husband and is eager to please him, while he in turn guarantees her a well-off lifestyle and provides her with financial security. However, when he is no longer able to provide, he loses his authority to control Carrie's behavior, who realizes that "she was not going to be dragged into poverty and something worse to suit him. She could act. She could get something and then work up" (Dreiser 1994: 378), turning thus into an ambitious and self-centered New Woman who is willing to do anything in order to fulfill her wishes.

In conclusion, Dreiser shows that acting is something that Carrie does all her life and while on stage she is able to create an alternative identity and trade her image, aware that, as Caren Town states, "she must make men *feel* that she belongs to them alone, that she is their personal property" (Town 1994: 50). While she succeeds in manipulating her audience to believe it, finally becoming a talented actress, in *The House of Mirth*, instead, Wharton shows that Lily's performance on the *tableaux vivants'* scene exposes her to rude critics from the part of the male audience, who believes that her exhibition is meant to show off her body and make herself sexually accessible to men. According to Town, "For Lily, acting provides a way to recover her power over society, and especially over the eligible men in that society […] The stage presentation of her beauty, she hopes, will add new currency to it and make it more

valuable" (Town 1994: 48), but, unlike Carrie, Lily becomes a victim of the desires of men and ends up ruining her reputation.

3.2 Consumption and Desire in *Sister Carrie*: The Impact of the Modern City and the Illusion of Happiness

In *Sister Carrie*, Dreiser shows that consumption works as a sort of exchange of valuables where everybody gives something for something else. Carrie, in particular, is presented both as a female consumer, who offers her attention to men in exchange for all the fancy and shiny things that they can offer her, and as an item of purchase to them, who provide her with their money buying thus the right to spend more time with her.

As a valuable object, Drouet and Hurstwood value Carrie more for her appearance than for her personality. Charles Drouet conceives Carrie as a genuine and modest girl, who might need his help due her wretched situation, and when he offers her his money, he is not simply doing a generous gesture since he expects something in return. As a traveling salesman, who knows very well how to convince people to buy things, he figuratively buys Carry by giving her the possibility to enjoy the expensive life she longs for. As Dreiser writes, "Like all women she was there to object and be convinced. It was up to him to brush the doubts away and clear the path if he could" (Dreiser 1994: 68).

After Drouet manages to win Carrie over, he introduces her to Hurstwood as his wife, since she is so physically attractive and charming to men's eyes that he wants to show her off to his friend. Carrie becomes thus a precious trophy possessed by Drouet, who is pleased that she is admired by other men, since she represents "the centre of interest" (Dreiser 1994: 187).

As for Hurstwood, he is even a greater deceiver than Drouet, since he presents himself with a fake identity to Carrie, hiding that he has a wife and two children. He is a middle-aged man, attracted to a girl who is twenty years younger than him, and according to McAleer, if "to Drouet, she was a part of the wardrobe of conspicuous affluence, to Hurstwood, [she was] a surrogate to negate middle-age disillusionment" (McAleer 1968: 85). Hurstwood, therefore, conceives Carrie as the way through which

he can realize his selfish desire to relive his youth, believing that the flirtation between them will be harmless and beneficial to both.

In *Sister Carrie*, Dreiser shows that men treat Carrie as a commodity, as an object to show off and they feel the right to control her, since they can guarantee her a well-off lifestyle. The fact that Carrie is thus considered more as a valuable commodity than a person to love explains both why Drouet flirts with other women while he is in a relationship with her and why Hurstwood lies to Carrie about his real identity, hanging out with her as long as nobody finds out about it. As in *The House of Mirth*, Lily too is considered a valuable object by the men of the society within which she lives, since they focus on her external beauty and rarity and wish to collect her and show her off.

However, not only is Carrie objectified by men with whom she has a relationship. Her sister Minnie does it too, since she sees her arrival in Chicago as an opportunity to profit from her. She agrees, in fact, to allow her sister to stay at her small apartment only if she can provide a small economic aid for the rent payments. As Dreiser says, "she had invited Carrie not because she longed for her presence, but because the latter was dissatisfied at home, and could probably get work and pay her board here. She was pleased to see her in a way, but reflected her husband's point of view in the matter of work" (Dreiser 1994: 15). Indeed, as soon as Carrie enters the house, her brother-in-law requests her to find a job, by advising her to "look in those big manufacturing houses along Franklin Street and just the other side of the river" (Dreiser 1994: 13-14), where "lots of girl work" (14).

During her stay at the Hansons' apartment, Carrie realizes that if she keeps living with her sister by giving her a large share of her meager paycheck, she will not be able to afford anything she longs for. She, in fact, wants to enjoy all the expensive things that the city offers, but she does not have enough money to accomplish all her wishes. Moreover, when she loses her job in the shoe factory due her sickness, Mr. Hanson warns her that if she is not able to find another job shortly, contributing thus to household expenses, she will have to leave his house. Hanson's warning worries Carrie, since she does not want to leave Chicago, because the idea of returning to live a miserable life in Columbia City is not an option for her.

As Dreiser writes,

> Columbia City—what was there for her? She knew its dull little round by heart. Here was the great mysterious city which was still a magnet for her. What she had seen only suggested its possibilities. Now to turn back on it and live the little old life out there—she almost exclaimed against it as she thought. (Dreiser 1994: 65)

Carrie, in fact, leaves her hometown and comes to Chicago with the hope of improving her status and once fascinated by the exciting life of the wealthy people who live in this big city, she immediately wants to be a part of it. As soon as she arrives in Chicago, Carrie notices that the streets are filled with people and crawled with huge department stores and fine wares, and "realized in a dim way how much the city held—wealth, fashion, ease—every adornment for women, and she longed for dress and beauty with a whole and fulsome heart" (Dreiser 1994: 23).

As the photograph below shows, a large crowd of people is gathered outside of Marshall Field & Co. on State Street in downtown Chicago, which was one of the greatest department stores at the time in which *Sister Carrie* was set.

Figure 11. Barnes-Crosby Company, "Exterior View of Marshall Field & Company", (circa 1905). Courtesy of The Chicago History Museum.

Since the first chapter of the novel, the city is characterized as a tempter and seducer for women, and as such it plays a key role in Carrie's life. As the author writes,

> The city has its cunning wiles no less than the infinitely smaller and more human tempter. There are large forces which allure, with all the soulfulness of expression possible in the most cultured human. The gleam of a thousand lights is often as effective, to all moral intents and purposes, as the persuasive light in a wooing and fascinating eye. Half the undoing of the unsophisticated and natural mind is accomplished by forces wholly superhuman. A blare of sound, a roar of life, a vast array of human hives appeal to the astonished senses in equivocal terms. Without a counselor at hand to whisper cautious interpretations, what falsehoods may not these things breathe into the unguarded ear! Unrecognized for what they are, their beauty, like music, too often relaxes, then weakens, then perverts the simplest human perceptions. (Dreiser 1994: 3-4)

According to Pizer, the city is as a sort of magnet which attracts people to it, "a symbol of experience, and to the innocent it symbolizes above all the wonder of experience, of life, which lies before them. It seems to promise happiness, beauty, excitement" (Pizer

1991: 53). However, from the very first moment that Carrie "passed along the busy aisles, much affected by the remarkable displays of trinkets, dress goods, shoes, stationery, jewelry" (Dreiser 1994: 22), the impact that the city has on her makes her feel like a miserable and powerless woman, since she realizes that she does not have the money to buy all the glamorous and flashy stuff that the city can offer. According to Dreiser,

> There was nothing there which she could not have used—nothing which she did not long to own. The dainty slippers and stockings, the delicately frilled skirts and petticoats, the laces, ribbons, hair-combs, purses, all touched her with individual desire, and she felt keenly the fact that not any of these things were in the range of her purchase. She was a work-seeker, an outcast without employment, one whom the average employé could tell at a glance was poor and in need of a situation. (Dreiser 1994: 22)

If on the one hand the impossibility to buy what she desires makes Carrie discouraged and disregarded, on the other it triggers in her the hope that one day she too will be a rich woman wearing expensive clothes, dining in luxury restaurants and going to the theater, thus entering that world of influential people that she admires so badly.

One of the persons who plays a key role in introducing Carrie to the rich lifestyle of Chicago city is Mrs. Hale. She is one of Carrie's neighbors in Chicago and her influence in Carrie's life stimulates in the latter the desire for wealth and elegance, strengthening also her fascination with the theater. As Dreiser writes: "Not long after Carrie arrived, Mrs. Hale established social relations with her, and together they went about. For a long time this was her only companionship, and the gossip of the manager's wife formed the medium through which she saw the world" (Dreiser 1994: 102).

One day, Mrs. Hale asks Carrie to accompany her on one of her carriage rides to see the mansions of the wealthy people on the north side of the Shore Drive. Carrie is immediately struck by the "richly carved entranceways where the globed and crystalled lamps shone upon paneled doors, set with stained and designed panes of glass" (Dreiser 1994: 115-116).

As Dreiser says,

> She was perfectly certain that here was happiness. If she could but stroll up yon broad walk, cross that rich entranceway, which to her was of the beauty of a jewel, and sweep in grace and luxury to possession and command—oh! how quickly would sadness flee; how, of an instant, would the heartaches end. She gazed and gazed, wondering, delighting, longing, and all the while the siren voice of the unrestful was whispering in her ear. (Dreiser 1994: 116)

The consumer society of Chicago, which Carrie explores through the help of Mrs. Hale, quickly draws her to all of its pleasures, stimulating thus in her the desire for material success, which highly increases when Carrie moves to New York and meets Mrs. Vance. She is the female character who introduces Carrie into the world of New York high society, intensifying her desire for lust and money.

The Vances live across the hall from Carrie and Hurstwood's New York apartment and they are a relatively well-off couple. Since the very beginning of her acquaintanceship with Mrs. Vance, Carrie seems envious of her vast jewelry and wardrobe collection. As Dreiser writes,

> She seemed to have so many dainty little things which Carrie had not. There were trinkets of gold, an elegant green leather purse, set with her initials, a fancy handkerchief exceedingly rich in design, and the like. Carrie felt that she needed more and better clothes to compare with this woman, and that anyone looking at the two would pick Mrs. Vance for her raiment alone. (Dreiser 1994: 322)

As Mrs. Vance's friendship with Carrie increases, she provides the latter with good exposure to the theatre, introducing her to the glamourous world of Broadway. She makes Carrie realize that what really counts in this city is keeping up with appearances, thus "every fine lady must be in the crowd on Broadway in the afternoon, in the theatre at the matinée, in the coaches and dining halls at night" (Dreiser 1994: 333).

In order to be fashionable, it was important for every woman to show herself on Broadway Avenue, which at the end of the nineteenth century hosted "a very imposing procession of pretty faces and fine clothes. Women appeared in their very best hats, shoes and gloves, and walked arm in arm on their way to the fine shops or theatres strung along from 14th to 34th" (Dreiser 1994: 323).

After Carrie's stroll down Broadway, if on one hand she "felt that she was not of it" (Dreiser 1994: 324), on the other her desire to change her poor looks became

stronger than ever and "she resolved that she would not come here again until she looked better. At the same time she longed to feel the delight of parading here as an equal. Ah, then she would be happy" (324).

Carrie defines her identity on the basis of what she does not have and what others do have, and that is why, in order to improve it and overcome the symptoms of social inequality resulting from the comparison with other women, she desires to buy equally beautiful clothes. Dreiser shows thus that identity is defined by the power to spend money on fashionable consumer goods and, as Kaplan claims, "for the new self-image they seem to offer" (Kaplan 1988: 149).

However, throughout the end of the novel, Carrie realizes that expensive material goods cannot give her full happiness, since, as Ames helps her understand, it does not come with being rich. In the novel, Bob Ames, i.e. Mrs. Vance's cousin, has an important influence on Carrie's consumerist vision and Dreiser describes him as a man quite different from the other male characters of the novel, since he despises the attitudes of the wealthy people whose only concern is to show off their wealth. As he tells Carrie while they are eating with the Vances' in a luxurious restaurant, "it is a shame for people to spend so much money this way" (Dreiser 1994: 333) and "they pay so much more than these things are worth. They put on so much show" (334).

Carrie, who is a worshipper of all consumable things, is shocked when Ames declares her that "a man doesn't need this sort of thing to be happy" (Dreiser 1994: 336), but rather than taking him for crazy, she is intrigued by him. He helps her realize that the consumer society in which they live deludes people into believing that happiness lies in attaining money, but instead leads them to compete with each other, making them only more miserable.

Throughout the novel, Carrie pretends to love Drouet and Hurstwood only to get what she wants, but even if through her acting career she has earned the money to purchase everything she desires and has achieved success as a Broadway actress, she realizes that she is not yet fully satisfied. She lives in one of the most luxurious New York hotels and figures in the front page of newspapers, but even if she has achieved everything she wanted, she still longs for more.

The sense of fulfillment given by the fame and the possession of material goods is in fact insatiable, and as such impossible to achieve. As Pizer states, "at the end her

more basic and darker inner convictions have been confirmed: she is stripped of the illusion that happiness could be found in men or material goods - or even in fame as an artist" (Pizer 1991: 38).

In conclusion, if at the beginning the city of New York seems to satisfy Carrie's compulsive desire for nice material goods and immediate pleasure, it instead disappoints her, making her feel lonely and empty. The blame is in fact on the society, since it deceives Carrie into believing that happiness is measured by the possession of how many goods one has. It leads her to believe that the more one has, the better one's reputation and social status will be, but, as the novel demonstrates, wealthy people are everything but happy, since they always long for more and can never be completely satisfied.

By the end of the novel, Carrie finds success by turning into a talented actress, but she fails to achieve real happiness and finds herself more miserable than ever while sitting in her rocking chair. As Pizer states, "at the end Carrie remains melancholy, as she begins to see that all she has aspired to, including fame, cannot satisfy her needs" (Pizer 1991: 25), becoming thus "the old, mournful Carrie—the desireful Carrie,—unsatisfied" (Dreiser 1994: 487).

Chapter Four

Women in the Feminist Utopian World of *Herland*: Herlanders as Representatives of a New Type of Woman at the Turn of the Twentieth Century

4.1 Motherhood: The Collective Principle at the Core of the All-Female Community of Herland

Herland is a utopian novel written by Charlotte Perkins Gilman and published in 1915. The novel describes an isolated and peaceful society, probably located in the forests of South America, inhabited entirely by women, who, for two thousand years, have reproduced via parthenogenesis giving birth to only girls. One day, three American male explorers named Vandyck Jennings, Terry Nicholson and Jeff Margrave, join a scientific expedition to this land, after hearing rumors that it is populated only by women. The men are intrigued by this strange land cut off from the rest of the world, as they are driven by a desire for adventure, knowledge and by fantasies aroused by the tales about the existence of an all-female country without men's presence.

Van, the narrator, is the rational sociologist of the group, who believes that he can benefit from Herland, since as a matriarchal society it is a community which interests him from a sociological point of view and he later will overcome his initial prejudice and believe that it has much to teach him and the society he comes from. Jeff, a doctor and botanist, is a southern gentleman who has refined considerations of idealized femininity and womanhood and soon comes to appreciate this land and its culture. Finally, the third member of the crew is Terry, who is regarded as the driven force behind the expedition to Herland. He is portrayed as the classic chauvinist, who prides himself on his knowledge of women and control over their mind.

Upon the men's arrival in Herland, they are struck by the evident cultivation of the forests and the ability with which the roads have been built, and interpret these signs as a proof that there must be men around in this land. However, despite the men's belief that a highly civilized society composed of only women is unlikely to exist, they soon

are forced to question their assumptions, since they realize that everything in this country is characterized by beauty, peace and order, and the country is free from crime, war, disease and poverty. In this long journey, the three men will often be questioning their patriarchal gender ideology, highlighting thus the differences between the real world and the utopian one.

I chose to discuss this novel in my thesis because the women depicted by Gilman in *Herland* represent a new type of woman, who overturns the patriarchal concept of femininity and exercises full control over her own body. The representation of these new utopian women in *Herland* occurs, in fact, in a period of transition between the breaking of the cult of domesticity, which promoted the image of the woman as the angel of the house, and the claim of sexual liberation in the early 1920s.

Through this utopian novel, Gilman shows that women can broaden the domestic sphere and embrace the entire community by engaging in activities outside the home, demonstrating thus that it is possible to create an all-female community where women can prove to possess the same skills and potentialities as men. In addition, as Chloé Avril writes, through her novel the author proves that, "what is deemed natural or unchangeable about women in her society [...] is in fact based on patriarchal assumptions only" (Avril 2008: 68). Gilman's utopian novel, thus, overcomes cultural gender norms of the male society, exposing the historical construction of the notion of gender.

The term *utopia* has Greek origins, and, as Carol Kessler underlines, "the word is a pun on *ou* (after the Greek for 'no') and *eu* (after the Greek for 'good'); *topos* means 'place' in Greek. Thus *eutopia* is the ideal 'no place' of the imagination, the possible 'good place', better than the author's current society" (Kessler 1995: 7). Historically, the genre of utopia dates back to 1516, when Thomas More's *Utopia* was published, but it begins to take its modern shape towards the end of the nineteenth century, also thanks to the contribution of feminist thought, which led women to imagine a society free from patriarchal domination, within which they could express themselves freely without the need to conform to predetermined rules.

As Avril highlights, by using this literary genre to create a fictitious reality free of any gender constraints, "feminist utopian writers particularly need to question the gender hierarchy that forms part of the ideological discourse of patriarchy" (Avril 2008:

13), thus showing that behaviors attributed to women and traditionally considered immutable within the patriarchal society could actually be changed and overturned.

In the utopian novel *Herland*, Gilman depicts an alternative society, which, according to Denise Knight, "satirizes sexism and inequality, and [where] Gilman effectively exposes the absurdities and limitations of patriarchal practices and institutions" (Knight 1997: 79). By ridiculing the stereotypes of the conservative male mindset with a slight irony, Gilman's utopian novel questions the cultural gender constructs of the Western male society, showing that if a community entirely made up of women is achievable and can perfectly function without men, then their subordination is wrong and damages the whole society.

In order to create a perfect community, according to Jill Rudd & Val Gough, "women need to be alone, away from the primary source of their oppression, to find out who they are, so that they can not only become whole human beings but also contribute through a fully developed intelligence to creating a better world" (Rudd & Gough 1999: 112). Moreover, only when women have matured and "have developed themselves—when they can demonstrate that they are as clear thinking and industrious as the best of men—they can re-integrate with them" (112). Gilman, thus, shows that the separation of women from men does not necessarily need to be definitive, but it is a phase initially required to allow the former to evolve and prove that they are able to live and work together in an atmosphere of equality.

The utopian country of *Herland*, according to Rudd & Gough, "is a womb-like kindergarten, a gigantic and fertile place filled with women and female children who make a cult of maternity and celebrate motherhood" (Rudd & Gough 1999: 47), i.e. the principle on which the whole community is based.

It is described as "a sort of Maternal Pantheism" (Gilman 1998: 51), namely a religion that pervades every aspect of society and the principle that leads women to create a feeling of sisterhood which seeks the best for children and encourages a continuous growth of the mind. As Van, the narrator, writes, "Their religion, you see, was maternal; and their ethics, based on the full perception of evolution, showed the principle of growth and the beauty of wise culture. They had no theory of the essential opposition of good and evil; life to them was growth; their pleasure was in growing, and their duty also" (Gilman 1998: 87).

Everything in Herland is calm, harmonious and shared. There are no dangerous animals, no wild areas, the forests are cultivated, and the plants produce nourishing fruits, because women have developed their society in harmony with nature. Gilman portrays *Herland* as a land "as neat as a Dutch kitchen" (Gilman 1998: 45), where war, violence and negative feelings do not exist, and where women function as a united community of mothers and sisters, devoted to such high ideals as "Beauty, Health, Strength, Intellect, Goodness" (51). By describing *Herland* as a well-organized and advanced community, functioning "like an enormous anthill" (57), within which women have built a safe environment, Gilman aims at presenting this all-female society as better than the American one, where women are not allowed to contribute their skills.

Herlanders represent a new type of mothers, who are actively engaged for the welfare of their community and who, as Kessler states, through "the practice of autarchy, or self-government, in place of patriarchal domination, and a theory of a Loving Power have permitted each [of them] to develop a strong and positive sense of self" (Kessler 1995: 75). The description that Gilman provides of these utopian women aims to make the three explorers realize that they are confronted with a different version of motherhood from that embodied by the motherly figure belonging to their society. As Van says: "We are used to seeing what we call 'a mother' completely wrapped up in her own pink bundle of fascinating babyhood, and taking but the faintest theoretic interest in anybody else's bundle, to say nothing of the common needs of all the bundles" (Gilman 1998: 58-59). Therefore, contrary to early twentieth-century American mothers, who intend motherhood as an entirely individual function, in *Herland* it acquires a sense of communal responsibility.

In this all-female world, where the most prominent role for a woman is to be a mother, society is organized around maternal activities, first and foremost the education and care of children. The women of *Herland* are specialized in different areas, but the one that is of greatest interest to them is in fact that related to the growth and educational development of children. In this regard, among the mothers of the community, some specialized women are specifically selected to cover childrearing, which, as one of the three guides of the visitors, Somel, tells Van, "is our highest art, only allowed to our highest artists" (Gilman 1998: 70).

Up to the age of three, children live in close contact with their biological mother, who nurses them and takes care of their well-being. Then, there is a separation between the mother and the child, who is entrusted to the care and education of wise and specialized teachers, "whose business it [is] to accompany the children along [...] the royal road to learning" (Gilman 1998: 92).

Since the collective aim of the Herlanders is to ensure that all children receive an excellent education, they facilitate their development by educating them in contact with nature, "provid[ing] an environment which feeds the mind without tiring it; all manner of simple and interesting things to do, as soon as they are old enough to do them; physical properties, of course, come first. But as early as possible, going very carefully, not to tax the mind, [they] provide choices, simple choices, with very obvious causes and consequences" (Gilman 1998: 91).

The education provided by the Herlanders is different from that taught in turn-of-the-century American society, since children were generally educated at home and were taught the old values of their country. Moreover, contrary to *Herland*, in the American society girls were generally excluded from education, since they were only meant to learn household chores such as sewing and cooking; only occasionally, they were offered a sort of "ornamental education" that could enhance their value on the marriage market.

In *Herland,* through the making up of new games, children are encouraged to develop new faculties and learn a wide array of interests. As Gilman writes, "in each step of the rich experience of living, they found the instance they were studying widen out into contact with an endless range of common interests. The things they learned were *related*, from the first; related to one another, and to the national prosperity" (Gilman 1998: 86). Unlike the old games of the conservative American society, which "came down from child to child, along the ages, from the remote past" (91), the women of *Herland,* thus, reject tradition by creating new and better games over time.

As they grow up, children are then provided with "a properly graduated series of exercises which will best develop each mind" and, once they have fed their young brain with knowledge, Herlanders ensure that they are taught two essential faculties, which, as Somel explains to Van, are considered "necessary for all noble life: a clear, far-

reaching judgment, and a strong well-used will" (Gilman 1998: 91), namely those values which will serve to form free and independent women.

While little girls from *Herland* are educated in a friendly environment within which they "grew up as naturally as young trees; learning through every sense" (Gilman 1998: 81), Van remarks that in the nation where he comes from, "children grow up in private homes and families, with every effort made to protect and seclude them from a dangerous world" (86). In addition, whereas the educational training provided to Herland children is not experienced as a social imposition by them, as they are "taught continuously but unconsciously" (81), children living in the men's nation "felt the pressure of that 'forcible feeding' of the mind" (81).

The educational system provided by the freedom-based female method is therefore beneficial for children, since they are motivated to learn more and more and then left free to specialize "on their chosen subject" (Gilman 1998: 81). The result is that of a unified country, without competition and where there is a strong sense of improving as a community.

Gilman shows that Herlanders have at heart child-rearing and make sure that the environment in which they grow up encourages them to keep a strong feeling of collaboration and solidarity with each other. Since every woman in the community sees children as her own responsibility, they do not have a family name. Mothering, according to the author, must be a collective function and not an individual one, with women "each hav[ing] a million children to love and serve" (Gilman 1998: 60).

By describing Herland's utopian parent-child relationship, Gilman shows that the patriarchal institution of the nuclear family is not natural and can be changed. The fact that in *Herland* no child has a family name shocks the three male visitors, since in the society in which they live, the male parent passes on to his children his surname, which is also acquired by his wife, as a symbol of his authority over them. As Van says, "Here, as in so many other instances, we were led to feel the difference between the purely maternal and the paternal attitude of mind. The element of personal pride seemed strangely lacking" (Gilman 1998: 64). In *Herland*, the concept of private property, including the property of one's offspring, does not exist, since "the finished product is not a private one" (64) and women "are all descended from a common source—all one 'family'" (64).

4.1.1 The Maternal Economy of Herland

In her novel, Gilman provides a redefinition of the concept of home, showing that, contrary to the women of the early twentieth-century United States, whose role was restricted to activities concerning the domestic space, the New Women of *Herland* have broadened the notion of domesticity by engaging in external activities on which their economy is based and turning the whole country into a well-cared-for home. They aim at developing and maintaining the well-being of the present and future generations over time, showing a great engagement in the working activities of their country.

Herlanders share a common duty to work and each woman is free to specialize in a particular profession according to her skills and interest. Among the various working activities carried out by Herlanders, Gilman portrays them as skilled farmers. If on the one hand they exploit the resources that the land offers them, on the other they are careful to replace what they consume, with the result that by taking care of their present, they can leave it in better condition to future generations. As Gilman writes,

> These careful culturists had worked out a perfect scheme of refeeding the soil with all that came out of it. All the scraps and leavings of their food, plant waste from lumber work or textile industry, all the solid matter from the sewage, properly treated and combined—everything which came from the earth went back to it. (Gilman 1998: 67-68)

Besides being farmers, the women of *Herland* are also gardeners, carpenters, food producers, weavers, judges and doctors, and are depicted as self-sufficient women, who do not need men to provide for their own sustenance. Unlike women in patriarchal America, who are not allowed to work and are instead "loved-idolized-honored-kept in the home to care for the children" (Gilman 1998: 52), in the utopian society that Gilman describes, all women have the opportunity to work, regardless of the type of work they do, thus becoming able to expand their maternal abilities outside the home and contribute to the betterment of their society.

Through their efforts, women have created such an advanced country that the three male explorers, used to believe that only men are able to construct efficient and well-organized nations, doubt that only female persons inhabit the place. On their arrival in Herland, in fact, seeing from the airplane the cleanliness and order with which

the place is kept, “where even the forests looked as if they were cared for” (Gilman 1998: 10), they were sure that this civilized country must be inhabited by men.

According to the men’s patriarchal ideology, the presence of well-built roads, elaborated architecture and electric motors cannot be attributed to the women’s ability, since the latter are not expected to have attained such a state of civilization by themselves. However, as Rudd & Gough underline, Gilman shows that these women, once they are free to develop and grow, are not inferior to men, since these New Women “are as capable as [the latter] of scientific and technological achievement” (Rudd & Gough 1999: 118).

The level of industrial development reached in Herland, and women’s involvement in activities that in the American society of the turn of the century were closely associated with the male sphere, make Herlanders an embodiment of the economically self-sufficient version of the New Woman, one who is actively involved in the social and economic sphere of her nation and actively contributes to its progress.

4.2 Sexuality, Femininity and Marriage in *Herland*: Questioning Cultural Gender Constructs in the Feminist Utopian Novel

The women of *Herland* offer a radical portrait of the New Woman, as they question the gendered concept of sexuality and femininity of the turn-of-the-century American patriarchal society. Through the voice of Van, Gilman manages to underline that thanks to their encounter with Herlanders the three men’s ideas about women must evolve, going from conceiving the existence of women solely as a complement to male masculinity, to realizing that “female traits” attributed to women have been created by men just in order to please themselves. As a result, the author highlights that gender roles are only cultural constructs, not biological ones, and by the end of the novel, the women of Herland are no longer evaluated by Van through the concept of femininity (which they totally lack), but through that of humanity (which they have in abundance).

Initially, though, once the three men men realize that this land is actually inhabited only by women, they are astonished by their looks and appearance, since their aspect – body and clothes – does not reflect what male desire has imposed on women.

They start experiencing difficulty in defining them as women and, along the novel, they are often inclined to question their femininity.

Upon their arrival in the utopian society, the three men are convinced they will find women who have traits that they unconsciously associate with the female stereotype, such as youth and beauty. As Van says, "In all our discussions and speculations we had always unconsciously assumed that the women, whatever else they might be, would be young. Most men do think that way, I fancy. 'Woman' in the abstract is young, and, we assume, charming" (Gilman 1998: 17).

However, after being captured and brought into the country, the men are faced with women who do not mirror their patriarchal gendered beliefs and start commenting on their lack of femininity. According to Van, "They were not young. They were not old. They were not, in the girl sense, beautiful" (Gilman 1998: 16-17). The three explorers notice instead that these women are athletic, vigorous, "standing sure-footed and light as any pugilist" (17) and, as Rudd & Gough state, they "dress simply for comfort in outfits that seem like a combination of togas and bloomers" (Rudd & Gough 1999: 109). As a result, according to the men, "their dress and ornaments [have] not a touch of the 'come-and-find-me' element" (109), that is, they are not seductive.

A peculiar characteristic of the Herlanders' dresses is that "these women had pockets in surprising number and variety. They were in all their garments, and the middle one in particular was shingled with them" (Gilman 1998: 32). By introducing this detail in women's androgynous clothes, Gilman challenges the traditional gendered dress code, since, according to Avril,

> In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century women's clothing tended not to have many (if any) substantial pockets, a fact which, arguably, suggests the boundaries or costraints which operated upon women. Men's clothes had pockets within which they might carry a range of useful objects and by this could extend the body's personal space and challenge the distinction between public and private. (Avril 2008: 38)

Besides the appearance and the style of dress, Gilman describes the Herlanders as having short hair, provoking thus amazement in the three men, who, once again, are faced with a reversal of gender roles. As Van reveals, the women of Herland have short hair, "some a few inches at most" (Gilman 1998: 26), which, previous to the 1920s, it

was considered considerably unfeminine. As Jeff laments, “if their hair was only long, [...] they would look so much more feminine” (27).

In an era in which long hair was the norm, Gilman aims at disrupting the gender norms of femininity, and she claims so through Van’s words, who realizes that “those ‘feminine charms’ we are so fond of are not feminine at all, but mere reflected masculinity—developed to please us because they had to please us, and in no way essential to the real fulfillment of their great process” (Gilman 1998: 50).

In the novel, the utopian female figures of Herland embody a new type of woman, which, through her gestures and physical connotations, subverts the traditional social constructs of the male-dominated society, thus asserting the existence of a New Woman freed from submission to masculinity and able to assert and express her own female identity.

Along the novel, the three men find themselves questioning another gender construct, i.e. the sexuality of the women of Herland. Upon their arrival in the utopian society, the three men reveal their patriarchal prejudice about sexuality. They conceive the country as “a sort of sublimated summer resort” (Gilman 1998: 6), and they fantasize about the possibility that its women will become their objects of sexual desire and of conquest, ending up as their property.

Each man, in particular, reflects a different type of sexist attitude towards women. Vandyck Jennings represents the moderate type and he sees the Herlanders as objects of scientific inquiry. Jeff Margrave, the chivalric and romantic physician, conceives women as objects to be idealized and protected. Finally, the last member of the crew is Terry O. Nicholson, the wealthy, womanizer and strongly patriarchal man who reveals a strong predatory nature and aims at mastering women only for his pleasure.

In the androcentric society inhabited by these men, the interest in women is given by their sexual potential and the desire they arouse. As the narrator tells us, for Terry “there were two kinds of women – those he wanted and those he didn’t; Desirable and Undesirable was his demarcation” (Gilman 1998: 18). Terry’s classification of women thus reveals the cultural tendency of the male society to consider women as mere sexual objects and to treat them as unequal to men.

However, the women of Herland break with the men's expectations in terms of sexuality. They are neither flirtatious, nor susceptible to flattery and they lack sexual availability to men. The latter are disturbed that women do not express sexuality and soon after they realize that Herlanders have eliminated the need for sex in their land. These utopian women explain to the three male explorers that they overcame the need and desire for sex in their community, since they reproduce by parthenogenesis and achieve pleasure through the bond of motherhood, on which their relationships are based.

Parthenogenesis, "that means virgin birth" (Gilman 1998: 39), appeared for the first time two thousand years before, following the aftermath of some natural disasters and the extermination of the remaining male population. As the narrator reports, since no men were available for procreative purposes,

> for five or ten years [women] worked together, growing stronger and wiser and more and more mutually attached, and then the miracle happened—one of these young women bore a child. Of course they all thought there must be a man somewhere, but none was found. Then they decided it must be a direct gift from the gods, and placed the proud mother in the Temple of Maaia—their Goddess of Motherhood—under strict watch. And there, as years passed, this wonder-woman bore child after child, five of them—all girls. (48)

After that divine intervention, once they reached the age of twenty-five, all these daughters became pregnant, reproducing in the same manner their mothers had done, each giving birth to five little girls. As Avril points out, parthenogenesis symbolically "embodies the break with the male appropriation of the institution of motherhood" (Avril 2008: 152), giving women the possibility to maintain their species without the need for men.

Unlike women of the early twentieth-century American society, who could not exercise individual power over their body, since it was considered as men's property, the New Women of Herland are free from male sexuality and have full control of their own body. They are, in fact, "Conscious Makers of People" (Gilman 1998: 58), since they have developed the ability to control their biological functions to have or not have babies through desire for motherhood. As Van reports, "When a woman chose to be a mother, she allowed the child-longing to grow within her till it worked its natural miracle. When she did not so choose she put the whole thing out of her mind, and fed her heart with the other babies" (60-61).

While discussing with Somel, Van learns that the Herlanders practice selective breeding, and divide women into mothers and non-mothers. Women who are regarded as mentally and physically weak are asked not to give birth, while those who prove to have beneficial qualities, such as wisdom and physical strength, are considered suitable for giving birth to children. However, even if the former do not have children, they still have access to the collective role of mothering, so their contribution in creating a better society is still recognized.

Herlanders' control over their body proves especially important when, due to overpopulation, these women decide to only give birth to one child each, with the result of improving the quality of their lives. As the narrator says, "they did effectually and permanently limit the population in numbers, so that the country furnished plenty for the fullest, richest life for all of them […]. And then they set to work to improve that population in quality—since they were restricted in quantity" (Gilman 1998: 61).

These women's choice, in terms of sexuality, arouses criticism from Terry's part, since, in the patriarchal society from which he comes, the number of children a woman has is directly linked to her sexuality. Indeed, the more children a woman has, the more sexually attractive she is regarded. Since Herlanders decide to have only one child, they do not fit Terry's conception of sexuality, and, unlike his two other travel companions, by the end of the novel he remains the only one who does not show the slightest inclination to change his long-held androcentric beliefs.

In *Herland*, Gilman's criticism is not only limited to the reversal of the cultural gendered constructs of femininity and sexuality, as it is also addressed to one of the most important pillars of patriarchal society, namely the institution of marriage. While the Herlanders conceive marriage only as the means through which they can create an even better world, based on the collaboration of the two sexes, that is it is part of their dedication to the community, not an individualistic desire, the three visitors see it in a different way.

Indeed, unlike the Herlanders, the men believe that through the act of marriage they can share with their partners the pleasure of non-procreative sex and expect that once married they can get a house of their own and live in it like a real couple. Herlanders, however, desire sex only for procreation purposes and their marriage fails to aid them in developing a sense of sexual intimacy, made of love and passion.

In this scenario, the New Women of Herland change the marriage institution, which becomes a concession on the women's part, as they are the ones who establish the marriage arrangement, i.e. maintaining control of their sexual relationship. They freely decide how to use their bodies, when to have sex, thus underlining the difference with the women of the Western society, whose desires in marriage, as well as in all aspects of their lives, are of no relevance.

In the male-dominated American society, marriage was a religious and legal contract that united a man and a woman together, but they were not considered as equal parties. Husbands, in fact, exercised a strong authority over their wives, whose body, once married, legally became the property of their husbands. By introducing marriage in *Herland*, Gilman wants to focus on the male assumptions of the three men representative of androcentric culture, showing that marital things that in their society are generally taken for granted, such as the assumption that marriage gives them the alleged right to have sex, are actually rejected by the Herlanders, who retain their independence in all these matters.

The three men, therefore, realize that they can no longer exercise their will as they were previously accustomed, and have to respect the decisions taken by their future brides. Gilman, illustrating the development of the relations of the three explorers with their respective companions, aims at showing the superiority of the latter over their male partners, thus proving that traditional values and beliefs can be changed.

Before they get married, the three male explorers recount some of their marital traditions to their Herland partners. First, when Alima asks Terry the meaning of the word wife, he replies by saying that "a wife is the woman who belongs to a man" (Gilman 1998: 100), highlighting thus the patriarchal conception of men's proprietor rights over women. Then, Van continues by explaining to them that "what makes us all feel foolish, [...] is that here we have nothing to give you – except, of course, our names" (Gilman 1998: 100), revealing thus the male custom of attributing one's surname to the future bride, who, as a result, loses her father's name to take on a new one.

In another passage, when the three future husbands tell their women that they want each couple to have their own home, the latter are faced with another patriarchal conception linked to women's subordinate status. They are, in fact, shocked to realize

that the house is conceived as a sort of prison within which the woman lives and takes care of her children. In this context Terry argues that, in his country, "a man wants a home of his own, with his wife and family in it" (Gilman 1998: 82), to which Ellador replies: "Staying in it? All the time? […] Not imprisoned, surely!" (82).

By the end of the novel, when the three couples get married, each marriage takes a different turn. Van, first best friend and then Ellador's lover, accepts the marital arrangement that she proposes to him about their sexual relationship, and is the only one among the three men who manages to free himself from prejudices and assumptions about women, conceiving them as equals to men.

In his relationship with Ellador, Van transforms sexual love into what is called "loving up", which, as he says, "was a very good feeling after all. It gave me a feeling of queer feeling, after all, as if you were agitating some ancient dim prehistoric consciousness, a feeling that they were right, that this was the way to feel. It was like coming home to mother" (Gilman 1998: 120-121). Therefore, Van converts ideas about sexuality to motherhood, feeling like a child in front of the women of Herland.

As for Jeff, since his arrival in *Herland* he has been presented as a romantic Southern man "full of chivalry and sentiment" (Gilman 1998: 8), and his marriage to Celis does not seem really to change his old patriarchal prejudices, as he still manifests a tendency to idealize women, considering them as morally superior beings to be venerated and protected. Yet, even though he does not really grasp the real greatness of the Herlanders, he feels completely at ease in this all-female world and does not want to go back.

Finally, the third member of the crew who gets married is Terry, who remains fixed in his patriarchal ideas manifested already upon his arrival in *Herland*. Terry is described as a predator, who believes in the superiority of men over women. After his marriage, when he realizes that his partner Alima is not willing to submit to him, he shows a clear frustration with the restraints imposed by her and tries to take advantage of her without her consent. Due to his crude attempt at asserting his superiority over Alima, by trying to rape her, the Herlanders set up a trial and finally decide to expel Terry from the country.

This episode allows Gilman to highlight the discrepancy between the justice of Herland and that of the US at the turn of the twentieth century. As Van says, "in a court

in our country [Terry] would have been held quite 'within his rights,' of course. But this was not our country; it was theirs" (Gilman 1998: 113). With this sentence, Gilman suggests that Terry's predatory behavior towards Alima would be considered almost normal in his patriarchal culture, and the excuse Terry uses to justify his violent action is the widespread belief in Western society that women want to be dominated and conquered. Through Terry's violent act the author wants to criticize the American androcentric society, which not only defends male oppressive behavior but supports it, thus giving men the freedom to perpetuate them over time.

In conclusion, while Terry retains his oppressive attitude and makes no effort to change his assumptions about women, Van and Jeff undergo a conversion to the culture of Herland. On their arrival in the utopian land, they all thought that they would master the women of the country and teach them men's superiority. However, they are faced with a reversal of gender roles, since the New Women of *Herland* refuse to be classified as passive victims of patriarchal men, proving instead to be the masters of their own decisions and lives. As a result, the men, two of them at least, adapt to the customs and expectations of the all-female utopian society and end up acknowledging the limitations and the prejudices conveyed by their patriarchal society, while the one whose masculinity is unredeemable, is evicted from the country.

Herland ends on an optimistic note about the possibility of social change and the establishment of a bisexual community, where women share an equal status with men. By questioning tradition in general along the novel and showing that women can choose to oppose to it, Gilman hopes to bring improvements to the shortcomings of her world and prepare the way for a better society.

Conclusion

In my thesis, I have focused on the analysis of the main female figures described in the three literary works examined, from the late nineteenth century to the years preceding the Great Depression, to argue that the New Woman was a global and complex phenomenon that led to the birth of a new female icon, represented by multiple versions, each with its own distinctive features.

By representing the image of a woman who was open to change and as such different from the True Woman of the Victorian era, the New Woman aroused divergent opinions in the American society, since while many felt threatened by her presence because they feared her power to affect the stability of the status quo, others exalted her as a source of inspiration for the ideals that she represented.

In the course of my work, I have compared the three versions of the New Woman embodied by the main female characters of Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*, Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland*, showing that each one is unique in its kind, but they also share similarities with each other.

Regarding Wharton's novel, Lily can be considered a New Woman since she shows a certain inclination to change her status at a time when the old conservative values of the nineteenth century were giving way to new modern ideals. As a New Woman aware of her beauty and sexuality, she displays her sensuality in order to attract men, but when they are about to propose to her she interrupts the flirtation preventing them from exercising physical control over her. Even though she aspires to marry a rich man who can give her everything she longs for, she rejects marriage and sabotages all the marital proposals that she receives, rebelling thus against the patriarchal norms that relegate women to physical and economic dependence from their husbands.

Lily's desire for freedom and independence is also expressed in her desire to have a place of her own, as her friend Gerty Farish has, since she conceives the house as an externalization of herself, as a way through which she can express her personality, but unlike Gerty she is not ready to go all the way accepting to live in a shabby

environment. Indeed, she laments that single women are unable, as yet, to have the comfort of a pleasant home like unmarried men.

Like Lily, also Dreiser's heroine Carrie longs for autonomy and does not accept to bow to the prescribed social norms imposed upon her, but she is determined to achieve her happiness and the things she wants to possess at all costs. However, there is no room in society for moral women like Lily who try to challenge social norms without pushing the boundaries of what is considered as acceptable conduct, and therefore she becomes a victim of her own society which leaves her with no alternative than committing suicide, Carrie, instead, through her ambition and determination achieves success, becoming a Broadway star and a true representative of the modern New Woman of the late nineteenth century.

Along the novel, Carrie manages to realize her dreams through the conscious use of her charm and sensuality, features that define her as the *femme fatale* of the turn of the century. Carrie's evolution into the *femme fatale* is not instantaneous, but rather progressive, since she goes from being a naive girl who comes to Chicago without bad intentions, to a deceiver who deludes men around her, as they represent for her the opportunity to reach her goals.

However, even though Carrie pretends to love Drouet and Hurstwood only to get what she wants, by the end of the novel she realizes that expensive material goods cannot give her full happiness, leaving her unsatisfied. Indeed, if at the beginning the consumer society which Carrie explores quickly draws her to all of its pleasures, stimulating thus in her the desire for material success, in the end it deludes her into believing that happiness lies in attaining money, making her feel lonely and empty.

Finally, a new radical version of the New Woman is the one embodied by the utopian women of Herland, who prove that Western societies' ideas about gender are only historical constructs and not the real essence of women. Their peaceful, well-organized, rational community leads at least two of the three men to change their patriarchal notions about women. When faced for the first time with the Herlanders, the three men realize that they do not mirror their patriarchal gendered beliefs and start questioning the concept of femininity, but then they conclude that "female traits" attributed to women have been created by men just in order to please themselves.

Unlike women of the early twentieth-century American society, Herlanders are free from male domination and exercise full control over their own body. They change the marriage institution, which becomes a concession on the women's part, as they are the ones who establish the marriage arrangement, i.e. maintaining control of their sexual relationship. They freely decide how to use their bodies, thus underlining their difference from the women of the Western society, whose desires in marriage, as well as in all aspects of their lives, are of no relevance. Herlanders, thus, refuse to be classified as passive victims of patriarchal men, proving instead that they are the masters of their own decisions and lives, while the three men realize that they can no longer exercise their will as they were previously accustomed to, and have to respect the decisions taken by their future brides.

To conclude, Gilman shows that these women are not inferior to men, since the level of industrial development reached in Herland make them an embodiment of the economically self-sufficient version of the New Woman, who is actively involved in the social and economic sphere of her nation and no longer solely restricted to activities concerning the domestic space.

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Riassunto

La tesi analizza il fenomeno culturale della New Woman, sviluppatosi nella società americana a partire dagli ultimi decenni del diciannovesimo secolo fino agli anni precedenti la Grande Depressione, esaminandone, in particolare, l'evoluzione in tre opere letterarie fondamentali, ciascuna rappresentante una versione peculiare di questa nuova tipologia di donna: *The House of Mirth* di Edith Wharton, *Sister Carrie* di Theodore Dreiser ed *Herland* di Charlotte Perkins Gilman.

Nei giornali, nella letteratura e nelle illustrazioni, si cominciò a descrivere una nuova icona femminile, diversa dalle precedenti rappresentazioni femminili in termini di comportamento, aspetto fisico e desideri, che esprimeva paure e speranze sul cambiamento del ruolo della donna nella società. Per comprendere meglio le conseguenze che hanno portato all'avvento del fenomeno della New Woman, è importante ricordare che diversi cambiamenti avevano influito sulla situazione economica degli Stati Uniti, determinando importanti trasformazioni culturali e sociali.

Innanzitutto, in seguito al fenomeno dell'urbanizzazione, gran parte della popolazione americana emigrò, stabilendosi in città di medie e grandi dimensioni che offrivano nuove opportunità di lavoro. Di conseguenza, la gestione degli spazi domestici cambiò, poiché la casa non era più un centro economico dove le persone lavoravano e producevano per la società. La maggior parte delle attività, infatti, cominciò ad essere svolta al di fuori dell'ambiente domestico, da parte di figure professionali.

In aggiunta all'urbanizzazione, ci fu l'ascesa della classe borghese, che portò ad un cambiamento significativo nelle funzioni svolte dalle donne. Le donne della classe media cominciarono ad essere liberate dallo svolgimento delle tradizionali mansioni domestiche, interessandosi sempre di più alla sfera pubblica e ai vantaggi educativi e lavorativi che questa offriva.

Come conseguenza degli sviluppi economici e sociali che hanno dato alle donne la possibilità di staccarsi dall'ambiente domestico e di esplorare nuovi stili di vita, un acceso dibattito sulla possibile ridefinizione dell'identità femminile iniziò a dividere la società americana. La messa in discussione delle idee convenzionali sulla femminilità

sancita in epoca vittoriana era già avvenuta nel corso dell'Ottocento, un periodo dominato dall'ideologia del culto della domesticità, detta anche culto della vera donna, ossia un insieme di credenze sui ruoli di genere che stabilivano sfere d'influenza separate per uomini e donne.

Secondo questo culto, mentre gli uomini erano impegnati in attività legate alla sfera pubblica, le donne erano invece relegate ai doveri della sfera domestica. La donna, infatti, era responsabile della cura e dell'educazione dei figli, sosteneva il marito e svolgeva i tradizionali ruoli domestici. Inoltre, era considerata la guardiana della casa, di cui proteggeva la sacralità grazie alla sua superiorità morale. Tuttavia, la natura del lavoro domestico delle donne promuoveva l'idea che non erano adatte a ricoprire lavori fisicamente ed intellettualmente impegnativi, e per questo motivo erano escluse dalla sfera pubblica.

Nonostante le restrizioni a cui le donne erano soggette, esse riuscirono in qualche modo a sfuggire al loro confinamento nella sfera privata e a raggiungere il libero arbitrio, in una certa misura, attraverso la nozione di "moral suasion", ossia l'influenza positiva che potevano esercitare sulla società. La donna americana, infatti, era rappresentata come una virtuosa cittadina repubblicana, dotata di una forza etica e morale che le permetteva di prendersi cura dell'educazione dei suoi figli e di insegnare loro i valori del paese.

Poiché nel corso dell'Ottocento la casa aveva perso la sua centralità economica e culturale, l'idea della capacità delle donne di sostenere i valori nazionali solo attraverso la "moral suasion" cominciò ad essere messa in discussione. Fu in questo clima di cambiamento che si cominciò a discutere l'idea di un'identità femminile fissa. Le donne iniziarono a criticare alcuni dei valori associati al culto della domesticità, rivendicando il diritto ad alcune delle libertà e opportunità riservate esclusivamente agli uomini.

Negli ultimi decenni dell'Ottocento, quindi, meno vincolate dalle leggi vittoriane e dalla vita domestica rispetto alle generazioni precedenti, le donne acquisirono maggiore libertà di prendere decisioni relative alla sfera sociale e privata. Stavano lentamente diventando membri attivi della società e affermando gradualmente la loro presenza sul posto di lavoro, ottenendo anche l'accesso a strutture educative adeguate.

Alla fine del secolo, l'aumento delle opportunità di lavoro, insieme ai miglioramenti apportati nel campo dell'istruzione, aprirono la strada ad una

rivalutazione generale della condizione femminile, rendendo le donne più indipendenti e preparate a lasciare la vecchia sfera. A seguito di questi eventi, nuove problematiche iniziarono ad interessare la scena americana, in particolare in relazione alla preservazione dell'istituzione familiare. L'importanza attribuita al matrimonio cominciò infatti ad essere messa in discussione, tanto da essere concepito più come un'opzione che come un obbligo da parte di un numero sempre maggiore di donne, e alla fine del secolo si registrò una diminuzione del numero di donne sposate e un aumento del tasso di divorzi.

All'inizio del secolo, la nuova consapevolezza acquisita dalle donne circa la possibilità di decidere con chi e come volevano passare la loro vita, le aveva rese consapevoli del fatto che per liberarsi dalla dominazione maschile avevano bisogno di esercitare un controllo totale sul proprio corpo. Questa nuova consapevolezza sessuale rifletteva una nuova idea di sessualità femminile, nettamente diversa da quella dell'epoca vittoriana.

Mentre la sessualità di una donna vittoriana era considerata una virtù sacra che diventava proprietà di un uomo attraverso l'atto del matrimonio, le donne di fine Ottocento rifiutarono il ruolo di oggetti sessuali, divenendo le uniche responsabili della propria sessualità. La realizzazione dell'autonomia sessuale delle donne si manifestò soprattutto in seguito al loro ingresso nella sfera pubblica, la quale aveva permesso loro di ampliare le loro relazioni sociali. Molte donne iniziarono allora a flirtare liberamente con gli uomini, alcune si trovarono coinvolte in rapporti amorosi adulteri, mentre altre sperimentarono l'omosessualità, impegnandosi in nuove relazioni lesbiche.

Le nuove immagini femminili che circolavano alla fine del secolo, le quali segnarono una rottura con la True Woman dell'epoca vittoriana, rappresentavano generalmente la New Woman come una donna bianca appartenente alla classe borghese, indipendente, istruita e intelligente. Essa non era associata ad una singola immagine, ma incarnava una molteplicità di caratteristiche e comportamenti, che permetteva ad ogni donna di creare la propria versione di questa icona femminile.

La New Woman era infatti un fenomeno culturale di ampio respiro, incarnato da versioni rivoluzionarie che rifiutavano i valori celebrati dal culto della domesticità, ma anche da versioni moderate che ne conservavano alcuni e persino conservatrici, la cui

novità era limitata all'ambito dell'abbigliamento e dello sport, ma senza mettere in discussione l'idea che le donne fossero destinate ad essere mogli e madri.

Questa nuova immagine femminile rappresentava quindi vari tipi di donne, vale a dire operaie, atlete, riformatrici impegnate nei club femminili, donne della classe media che avevano ottenuto l'accesso all'istruzione superiore e a professioni un tempo riservate ai soli uomini, e persino versioni moderne della donna vittoriana, sicura di sé ed intelligente, ma che credeva ancora nella domesticità come vera e propria attività femminile.

L'immagine della New Woman era associata anche alle femministe, che promuovevano idee di libertà e uguaglianza, rivendicando in particolare parità di diritti, parità di retribuzione, indipendenza economica e libertà sessuale. La mobilitazione della New Woman in politica la rese associata al movimento per il suffragio di fine secolo, all'interno del quale le New Women divennero parte attiva nella campagna per il suffragio femminile, lottando per il diritto di voto che era concesso solo agli uomini.

L'icona femminile della New Woman era incarnata anche da versioni più licenziose, come quelle rappresentate dalle cosiddette "flappers". Cominciarono ad apparire sulla scena americana a partire dagli anni venti ed erano tipicamente descritte come donne indipendenti e senza principi, che rappresentavano una nuova idea di moda ed enfatizzavano il piacere e la libera sessualità, segnando una distanza dagli stereotipi vittoriani della donna borghese sottomessa.

Di tutte le versioni associate alla New Woman negli anni che testimoniano il suo sviluppo nella società americana, quella più apprezzata dal grande pubblico è la rappresentazione di un'icona femminile moderna ma gentile e delicata, incarnata dalla Gibson Girl. A differenza delle sue contemporanee dallo spirito libero che miravano a cambiare l'immagine femminile standard sfidando i ruoli di genere, questa icona femminile incarnò una versione più conservatrice e forgiò un nuovo ideale di bellezza nella società americana di fine secolo.

La Gibson Girl era l'incarnazione della donna bianca, borghese e nativa americana. Era tipicamente descritta come una donna single, ben istruita e intelligente, coinvolta nell'esercizio di attività fisiche e avente uno stile di vita confortevole. In quanto esponente di una nuova idea di bellezza femminile all'interno della società americana, la Gibson Girl promosse l'immagine di una donna atletica, alla moda e

indipendente, le cui abilità e la cui bellezza incarnavano la modernità degli Stati Uniti e i suoi migliori valori democratici.

La Gibson Girl simboleggiava una versione della New Woman che era decisamente moderna, ma non troppo radicale. Ambiva all'autorealizzazione e al raggiungimento di un certo grado di indipendenza, ma senza mai superare i confini dei ruoli femminili tradizionali. Dal momento che credeva nell'importanza dell'istituzione del matrimonio e nella conservazione del progresso della razza umana, era in grado di alleviare le paure degli uomini dalla dissoluzione dei valori vittoriani, promuovendo così l'immagine di una donna moderna e più libera rispetto a sua madre, ma ancora legata all'istituzione familiare.

Nella fase di transizione tra i periodi storici in cui si era sviluppato il fenomeno della New Woman, uno ancora legato strettamente ai valori conservatori promossi dal culto della domesticità, l'altro invece caratterizzato dall'avvento di una cultura consumistica moderna, si colloca la figura femminile di Lily Bart, ossia la protagonista del romanzo *The House of Mirth* di Edith Wharton.

Lily è una giovane donna americana single, appartenente alla cosiddetta "leisure class" della società newyorkese di fine Ottocento, e incarna lo stereotipo femminile della donna vittoriana che aspira a sposare un uomo ricco e a condurre una vita di ricchezze, assumendo così una funzione decorativa in quanto oggetto di desiderio agli occhi degli uomini. Tuttavia, pur conservando questi tratti vittoriani, Lily adotta anche un atteggiamento anticonvenzionale, che rivela lungo il romanzo il suo desiderio di autonomia e libertà nel prendere decisioni che riguardano la propria vita, contro i limiti imposti dalla gabbia sociale in cui vive.

Lily può essere considerata una New Woman poiché mostra una certa inclinazione a cambiare il suo status in un momento in cui i vecchi valori conservatori del diciannovesimo secolo stavano cedendo il passo a nuovi ideali moderni. Come New Woman consapevole della sua bellezza e sessualità, mostra la sua sensualità per attirare gli uomini, ma quando si propongono lei interrompe il flirt, impedendo loro così di esercitare un controllo fisico su di lei.

Anche se Lily aspira a sposare un uomo ricco che possa darle tutto ciò che desidera, rifiuta il matrimonio e sabota tutte le proposte matrimoniali che riceve, ribellandosi così contro le norme patriarcali che relegano le donne alla dipendenza fisica

ed economica dai mariti. Tuttavia, non c'è spazio nella società per donne morali come Lily che cercano di sfidare le norme sociali senza spingersi oltre i confini di ciò che è considerato un comportamento accettabile, diventando così vittima della propria società che non lascia alternative al suicidio.

Tra le versioni della New Woman apparse nella società americana all'inizio del ventesimo secolo, era presente anche la *femme fatale*, ossia la donna fatale, considerata l'archetipo della donna sensuale evocata dall'affascinante Salomé. L'opinione pubblica aveva attribuito alla *femme fatale* caratteristiche moderne e rivoluzionarie, come la trasgressione dei codici di genere e l'associazione con la libera sessualità, percepite come pericolose e minacciose per il benessere della nazione. L'atto di paragonare la New Woman ad una figura sensuale e predatrice aveva come scopo quello di mettere in guardia gli uomini contro la natura viziosa e passionale delle donne che rifiutavano il tradizionale ruolo domestico e che stavano causando un grande sconvolgimento all'interno della società.

Con l'avvento della modernità le donne iniziarono lentamente a spostarsi nel contesto urbano, accedendo agli spazi pubblici e ai vantaggi che esso offriva. Dal momento che le donne non erano più responsabili di alcune funzioni domestiche, potevano acquistare ciò di cui avevano bisogno al di fuori delle mura domestiche, diventando così consumatrici. Le donne camminavano per le strade senza timore di essere diffamate o molestate, e la creazione di un numero sempre crescente di grandi magazzini, facilmente raggiungibili grazie alle nuove reti di trasporto, permise loro di passeggiare per la città e acquistare nei centri commerciali, diventando così leader nel consumo di massa e protagoniste principali della città moderna.

In questo contesto moderno della fine del diciannovesimo secolo, Theodore Dreiser colloca l'eroina del suo romanzo *Sister Carrie*. Carrie è una giovane ragazza di campagna che decide di trasferirsi nella grande città di Chicago e incarna la versione moderna e trasgressiva della New Woman, che sfrutta la sua bellezza e le sue maniere sensuali per soddisfare i suoi desideri, e che attraverso la sua ambizione e determinazione raggiunge il successo, diventando una star di Broadway e una vera rappresentante della New Woman moderna di fine Ottocento.

La natura ambiziosa, determinata ed egocentrica di Carrie la porta a diventare l'amante di uomini facoltosi che lei stessa cerca di manipolare, in modo da guadagnare

pian piano una sempre più elevata posizione nella scala sociale. Carrie anela all'autonomia e non accetta di piegarsi alle norme sociali che le vengono imposte, mostrandosi sempre determinata a raggiungere a tutti i costi la sua felicità e le cose che vuole possedere, caratteristiche che la definiscono come la *femme fatale* di fine secolo. L'evoluzione di Carrie nella *femme fatale* non è istantanea, ma piuttosto progressiva, poiché passa dall'essere una ragazza ingenua che arriva a Chicago senza cattive intenzioni, ad un'ingannatrice che inganna gli uomini intorno a lei, in quanto rappresentano per lei l'opportunità di raggiungere i suoi obiettivi.

Lungo il romanzo, Carrie rappresenta anche la tipica consumatrice della società americana di fine Ottocento, diventando protagonista della città moderna, la quale stimola in lei il desiderio di successo materiale e intensifica il suo desiderio di lussuria e denaro. Tuttavia, alla fine del romanzo, Carrie si rende conto che i beni materiali costosi non possono darle piena felicità, lasciandola quindi insoddisfatta. Infatti, se all'inizio la società dei consumi che esplora la attrae rapidamente a tutti i suoi piaceri, stimolando così in lei il desiderio di successo materiale, alla fine la illude nel farle credere che la felicità sta nel raggiungere il denaro, facendola quindi sentire sola e vuota.

Alla fine dell'Ottocento, l'emergere della New Woman nella cultura letteraria e nella stampa popolare cominciò a suscitare opinioni divergenti, in quanto apprezzata da alcuni ma ripudiata da altri. Sulle pagine delle riviste, la New Woman era spesso rappresentata come una minaccia per l'ordine sociale di genere, dal momento che cominciava a mostrarsi in pubblico adottando comportamenti maschili.

L'interesse della Nuova Donna verso la sfera maschile diventò evidente per una moltitudine di caratteristiche, una delle quali riguardava il suo nuovo modo di vestire, che consisteva nell'adozione del cosiddetto "rational dress". La New Woman abbandonò i tipici corsetti e le lunghe sottogonne, che ne limitavano i movimenti e incarnavano la precedente vita domestica confinata, e li sostituì con gonne accorciate e comodi "bloomers", ovvero una sorta di pantaloncini larghi raccolti alle ginocchia per chi era più radicale, e gonne semplici per le altre. Questo stile di abbigliamento donava alla New Woman una maggiore libertà di movimento e le permetteva di essere più atletica e di indossare abiti pratici nel luogo lavorativo.

Questa riforma dell'abbigliamento riscosse un ampio consenso, soprattutto con l'invenzione della bicicletta alla fine del diciannovesimo secolo. L'uso di un

abbigliamento comodo abbinato a scopi ricreativi, come il ciclismo, contribuì a promuovere l'immagine di una donna libera, spensierata, in sella alla sua bicicletta mentre indossava orgogliosamente i nuovi pantaloncini nonostante le accuse di volgarità.

La bicicletta rappresentò un elemento centrale della figura della New Woman, in quanto simboleggiava libertà, modernità, atletismo e indipendenza. Divenne l'emblema dell'emancipazione fisica delle donne e generò diverse preoccupazioni nella società maschile, sfidando le norme di genere. Questo nuovo mezzo di trasporto rafforzò, infatti, una sensazione di libertà tra le donne, le quali avevano così nuove possibilità di allontanarsi dai confini fisici dello spazio domestico.

Oltre ai cambiamenti nell'abbigliamento e nello sport, le donne curarono anche il loro aspetto, provando nuovi tagli di capelli. Mentre molti credevano che tutti questi cambiamenti avrebbero reso le donne meno delicate e poco attraenti, la maggior parte delle donne giovani decise che era giunto il momento di scegliere il look più adatto a loro, e di fare ciò meglio ritenevano con il proprio corpo.

L'inversione dei ruoli di genere rappresentati dal nuovo stile di abbigliamento e dall'aspetto femminile è ben descritta nel romanzo utopico di Charlotte Perkins Gilman, intitolato *Herland*. In questo paese utopico e isolato, Gilman crea una comunità altamente sviluppata e tutta al femminile, all'interno della quale le donne incarnano una versione radicale della New Woman di inizio secolo, dimostrando che le idee delle società occidentali sul genere sono solo costruzioni storiche e non la vera essenza delle donne.

La loro comunità pacifica, ben organizzata e razionale porta almeno due dei tre uomini a cambiare le loro idee patriarcali sulle donne. Di fronte al primo incontro con le donne di Herland, i tre uomini si rendono conto che non rispecchiano le loro convinzioni patriarcali di genere e cominciano a mettere in discussione il concetto di femminilità, ma poi concludono che i tratti femminili attribuiti alle donne sono stati creati dagli uomini solo per piacere a sé stessi.

A differenza delle donne della società americana dei primi anni del ventesimo secolo, le New Women di Herland sono libere dal dominio maschile ed esercitano il pieno controllo sul proprio corpo. Cambiano l'istituzione matrimoniale, che diventa una concessione da parte delle donne, in quanto sono loro a stabilire l'accordo matrimoniale,

cioè a mantenere il controllo della loro relazione sessuale. Decidono liberamente come usare il proprio corpo, sottolineando così la loro differenza rispetto alle donne della società occidentale, i cui desideri nel matrimonio, così come in tutti gli aspetti della loro vita, non hanno alcuna rilevanza.

Le donne di Herland, quindi, rifiutano di essere classificate come vittime passive degli uomini patriarcali, dimostrando invece di essere padroni delle proprie decisioni e della propria vita, mentre i tre uomini si rendono conto che non possono più esercitare la loro volontà come erano abituati in precedenza, e devono rispettare le decisioni prese dalle loro future spose.

Attraverso questo romanzo, Gilman mira a sconvolgere le norme di genere della sua società, raffigurando un nuovo tipo di donna che, attraverso il suo comportamento e le sue connotazioni fisiche, sovverte le idee e le istituzioni tradizionali della società dominata dagli uomini, come la femminilità, la sessualità, l'istituzione del matrimonio e l'educazione, ed è libera dalla sottomissione degli uomini e capace di esprimere la propria identità.

Oltre alla diffusione della riforma dell'abbigliamento, della bicicletta e di un nuovo cambiamento nell'aspetto femminile, la società americana di fine secolo fu testimone di un altro grande cambiamento che aveva rivoluzionato la tradizione precedente, ovvero la presenza delle donne nei club. All'inizio del ventesimo secolo, un numero sempre più crescente di donne si radunò nei club, i quali divennero luoghi per preparare le donne alla vita pubblica e per aiutarle a perseguire una carriera lavorativa.

Molti club furono creati per scopi filantropici, come ad esempio per l'istituzione di strutture ospedaliere per gli orfani e l'assistenza ai poveri attraverso la raccolta di vestiti e la fornitura di cibo. Altri club invece furono fondati con l'obiettivo di migliorare le conoscenze delle donne sulle questioni riguardanti i dibattiti nazionali di fine secolo. Anche se molti club furono istituiti per scopi educativi e missionari, altri servirono invece come luoghi di intrattenimento. Questi club divennero uno dei principali interessi della stampa popolare, e alla fine del diciannovesimo secolo furono realizzate numerose caricature che ritraevano le donne nei club vestite in abiti maschili mentre fumavano, bevevano e chiacchieravano animatamente.

L'inclusione delle donne nei club fu criticata dagli uomini, i quali temevano che le donne potessero abbandonare le mansioni domestiche e impegnarsi in nuove attività

sociali. Inoltre, la presenza maschile nei club femminili era piuttosto limitata, se non assente, e ciò destava preoccupazioni tra gli uomini, che non potevano esercitare un controllo totale sulle donne.

In conclusione, alla fine dell'Ottocento, la New Woman divenne il principale oggetto di critica della stampa, che attraverso l'uso di parodie e caricature rappresentò i nuovi cambiamenti apportati dalle donne, le quali stavano rivoluzionando la concezione convenzionale di femminilità a favore di una più moderna. Rappresentando un'immagine di donna aperta ai cambiamenti e in quanto tale differente da quella vittoriana dell'epoca procedente, la New Woman aveva suscitato opinioni divergenti nella società americana, dal momento che mentre molti si sentivano minacciati dalla sua presenza, perché credevano nella sua capacità di incidere sulla stabilità dello status quo, altri la esaltavano come fonte di ispirazione per gli ideali che lei stessa rappresentava.

Tuttavia, l'ironia maschile non riuscì a fermare l'ascesa della Nuova Donna. Questa nuova icona femminile, allo stesso tempo moderna, consumista, alla moda, ma anche maschile, rivoluzionaria e radicale, contribuì a rappresentare le donne di fine secolo in una nuova luce, diversa da quella vittoriana delle generazioni precedenti e aperta a nuove trasformazioni.