UNIVERSITÀ
DEGLI STUDI
DI PADOVA

Università degli Studi di Padova

Dipartimento di Studi Linguistici e Letterari

Corso di Laurea Triennale Interclasse in
Lingue, Letterature e Mediazione culturale (LTLLM)
Classe LT-12

Tesina di Laurea

The Construction of Beauty: Women and American Advertisements in the 1920s

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Anno Accademico 2023 / 2024

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Abstract

This thesis delves into the phenomenon of consumerism and commodity culture, its origins and how it influenced society with long-lasting effects. Focus is given to the figure of the woman, that occupied a fundamental role in this passage, and was the main customer of this new arrangement. Advertisements, generally directed to women, have been analyzed for this thesis, and have showed the tendencies and preferences of the time. These, coupled with other previous researches and books, have helped paint a picture of the beauty culture of the 1920s in America, the main focus of this thesis. The several aspects of this world are taken into consideration and investigated, which allowed to better understand beauty culture and its many nuances.

Introduction

Consumerism has played a great role in the history of America, and shaped society and people's relationship with things. In the beginning of the 20th century, commodity culture started to spread in every aspect of life. Advertisements became fundamental for business owners, as they produced more and more, and wanted to sell as much as possible. The easiest and quickest way to do that, was by advertising their products.

Advertisements could be seen as a reflection of society, and for this reason, products were advertised primarily to women. This highlighted their role in the society of the time, as "angels of the house" with the purchasing power. Women's position, secondary in respect of men's, meant that they had the responsibility to spend their husbands' money in order to purchase products to take care of him and their children. For these reasons, many advertisements focused on the house, which was believed to be the natural environment for a woman. Although women had the power to spend the family's money, they had to channel it in domesticity. Advertisements thus helped to reinforce traditional gender roles in a time of many changes in that aspect, such as the advent of the New Woman or the fact that more and more women were beginning to work outside the house.

The kind of advertisements I will focus on in this thesis are the ones promoting beauty products. I will talk about their influence on society and women, along with the one of beauty culture itself. Physical appearance assumed a new and crucial importance, and it was set on a higher position in relation to the worries women were expected to have. A woman who neglected her appearance was a woman who failed. Beauty products were among the most advertised at the time. In the advertisements themselves women were used to promote this new "correct" way of life, where beauty products and a care for appearance was a must. Of course, in order to fully understand, we need to take into consideration the differences of advertisements and perceptions towards white and black women. For example, a lot of attention was directed to skin and hair for every woman, but for black women they held a particular significance, that I will explore in this thesis.

In my research, I have analyzed different articles, books, as well as advertisements of the 1920s, the period of time I will focus on. I will also take into consideration literary works such as *Quicksand* by Nella Larsen and *The House of Mirth* by Edith Wharton, and the movie *Passing*, inspired by Nella Larsen's novel of the same name.

Chapter 1: Consumerism and Commodity Culture

1.1 Origins

The concept of consumerism how we know it today is relatively young. The idea of buying for leisure was unknown before the birth of the consumer society, and people outside of the elite purchased only what was necessary for survival. The creation of this new society was not sudden, but the result of a process. Here, I will define how this practice came to be.

Peter N. Stearns, in his journal article "Stages of Consumerism: Recent Work on the Issues of Periodization," states that "a consumerist society involves large numbers of people staking a real portion of their personal identities and their quest for meaning – even their emotional satisfaction – on the search for and acquisition of goods" (Stearns 1997: 105). This is a quite familiar concept that can be applied to what has been our society in the last centuries, in which the acquisition of goods has been a part of our day-to-day life, consistently pushed by advertisements that gradually became inescapable. This society is a result of a process that spanned decades.

According to Stearns, the first and at the time most noteworthy consumerist society could be found in England in the Eighteenth century (Stearns 1997). This same notion is confirmed by Neil McKendrick in the book *The Birth of a Consumer Society: Commercialization of Eighteenth Century England* where he adds that, later in the century, there had been a true "consumer revolution" (McKendrick 1982). This means that the long process that preceded this shift came to a climax, that brought to an upheaval of society's order.

There are several different factors that might have caused this change in behavior and culture. Stearns brings to attention the role that world trade and local manufacturing might have had in bringing more wealth in the country. He mentions other possible

causes, such as “a decline in the hold of traditional religious motives, a weakening of the conventional social hierarchy, and the impact of new economic practices” (Stearns 1997). McKendrick adds other possible factors that aided the development of the society towards a commodity culture. He believes that London had a great role: its size and environment played their part in aiding this process. As McKendrick mentions, London was the biggest city in Europe at the time, and was incomparable to any other (McKendrick 1982: 21). Therefore, its influence on the culture was inevitable, as a great part of the population was exposed to it, included those who lived outside the capital. The citizens of England watched the life that was conducted in London and set to emulate it, an important element in this progress. As a matter of fact, this was another huge factor in the development of consumerism: the tendency towards emulation. This is an aspect explored by McKendrick. He states: “In imitation of the rich the middle ranks spent more frenziedly than ever before, and in imitation of them the rest of society joined in as best they might” (McKendrick 1982: 11). We can therefore infer the fundamental role the emulation had. The desire of every social class to imitate and maybe even join the one above is one of the greatest forces behind the birth of consumerism. It is what drove people to buy more and more things that they did not necessarily need, but that would get them closer to who was above them, and they would not stop until they reached their goal.

Because the reasons behind purchases changed, so did other aspects of it, such as the consumers. Children were starting to being marketed to as well, adding to the pool of possible customers. This meant that new products were being developed and marketed as well, trying to find something that could interest these new consumers (Stearns 1997: 111). These products had leisure in mind, and were not being produced because people needed them, but because they had the possibility to and wanted to buy them. Stearns states that “life should be able to satisfy such cravings, which were economically useful in an age when disposing of goods, not producing them, had become the leading economic issue” (Stearns 1997: 112). As a matter of fact, this process was characterized by an extensive production, far greater than needed, and the major dilemma was to dispose of the products. The supply was greater than the demand. This is highlighted in Roy S. Durstine’s book *Making Advertisements and Making Them Pay*, written in 1920, as well.

“Industry has faced the problem of getting back to a peace basis as rapidly and economically as possible. Merchandise has been produced in greater volume than was ever dreamed. As a nation we have set for ourselves new standards of volume and quality in production” Durstine states (Durstine, 1920: 10). At first, consumers focused their attention mostly on clothing and home goods. However, as the products offered became more varied, so did the interest of the customers, who became attracted to more and more different things (Stearns 1997: 109).

We have established that people had always had the desire to buy objects that they did not necessarily need, just for enjoyment. What kickstarted the consumerist phase for good was the newfound ability they now had to actually purchase these products. This ability was previously withheld by the wealthy, and also served to communicate to the rest of society their status (McKendrick 1982: 2). It was something that distinguished them from the “inferior masses”, and highlighted their “rightful place” in society, so that people could recognize them for who they were. It was also a time when women started to work more outside of the house, and therefore did not have as much time as they had before to produce what they might need at home. Because of this, the demand for home goods increased, as did the selection available, and therefore the possibility to choose what they most preferred (McKendrick 1982: 23). There was a shift in attitude: what people inherited were now bought. Even people with great inheritances did not refrain from buying new things (McKendrick 1982: 27).

Something had to change for people to finally be able to buy what they wanted, after so much time desiring to do so but not being able to. A significant reason seems to be the fact that families were earning more than before because of the rise of wages. This could be for different motives. For example, it could be because the price of food dropped thanks to the bountiful harvests, as A. H. John hypothesizes (John in McKendrick 1982: 23). Another explanation could be that it was because women and children had started to work as well, adding their wages to the total earnings of the family, as well as the long hours they worked (McKendrick 1982: 23). All this permitted the families that before had

no possibility to, to join the part of the society that could spend their excess money in things for leisure – something unknown to them up until that point.

Of course, opinions on the matter were not scarce. Not everyone was happy with this new approach to shopping. Complaints were made about it being "wasteful or disrespectful" and illnesses were associated to these new habits as well (Stearns 1997: 108). Part of the criticism was of a more personal nature: the wealthier part of society felt threatened by this newfound ability of the lower masses to actually climb the social ladder and move from one social layer to another. This new power in the hands of the lower classes highlighted the instability of the social structure, in which one could reach the top merely by purchasing products and spending money (McKendrick 1982: 16). This was especially worrying for them if we take into consideration Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony, according to which the control of things had a fundamental role in the hegemony of the ruling class (Martin 1993: 144). The lower classes' entrance in this world of purchases endangered their power.

1.2 Effects on Society

The impact on society of consumer culture is indisputable. It started with the consumer's interest on clothing and house goods, but it soon spread in every aspect of life. Therefore, there are many ways in which it has impacted the life of people. Here, I mean to explore the different ways in which we can identify commodity culture's influence. Consumerism soon led to people adding meanings to the action and to the things they bought. People's feelings are an essential component of this new society.

With all these changes in consumers, but also in production, manufacturers had to adapt, and find the fastest and most efficient way to sell their products to a clientele willing to buy them like never before. Therefore, changes in advertising had to be made. They were possible in part by virtue of the mass press and commercial posters, which had a huge role in assuring that the advertisements would reach as many people as possible, with the new ways offered to present them as particularly eye-catching and impossible to

ignore. Their content changed as well; in the way they spoke about the products. These "were increasingly associated with pleasure, even sensuality" as Stearns puts it (Stearns 1997: 110). Advertisers were progressively creating a connection between consumer and product that went beyond the latter's usefulness, and related to more human characteristics associated to objects. Advertising also notably increased in quantity, presenting the consumers with a wide selection of products, which filled magazines and newspapers (McKendrick 1982: 11). As Durstine states, even without advertisements products would sell, but with them they would do so in a much faster way and in a greater quantity (Durstine 1920: 12). By the 1920s, the period of time I will further analyze, advertisements would become truly unescapable. Quoting Durstine, "The only man who can say that advertising doesn't sell him anything these days is one who shuts himself up in a cage in the heart of an African jungle. And even he would probably find that most of his camping supplies were advertised products" (Durstine 1920). No product was left without advertisement, something that had become so integral to the society that it was unthinkable to be able to evade it.

Given that now consumerism was an actual part of life, it was bound to bring significant changes to society and to the way people approached this new culture. To begin with, now people had a different relationship with the act of purchasing. Since it was not something strictly necessary for survival anymore, but something people did in their leisure time, it was now an appreciated part of life. In his journal article, Stearns mentions yearning, "a sense, at an extreme, that one's life cannot be complete without this or that acquisition" (Stearns 1997: 105). People now actively wanted to purchase products, it was something they thought about in their free time, almost a hobby as any other. Furthermore, some believed in the "homogenizing power of mass consumption," which would be the ability of consumerism to push people to buy the same products as each other, "mainstream tastes and values" (Cohen 1989: 8). This meant that consumerism chipped at the individuality of people, giving them all the same preferences, making them buy the same things, drawing from their perceived needs or their identities. As Mary Louise Roberts affirms in her journal article "Gender, Consumption, and

Commodity Culture", "commodities play an ever-increasing role in shaping social identity and cultural meaning" (Roberts 1998: 821).

The possibility to acquire all these new and different things increased the desire for them. Objects acquired a new stand in society, much more important than before. With this new mentality, people regarded the things they bought higher than before (Martin 1993: 147). They were now more than just objects, rather something integral to the life of people, and therefore with an added meaning. People were attached to their new things, as it was now expected. Stearns presents the example of children and toys. He reports that parents were expected to gift their kids toys and express their affection with them. The children themselves were supposed to have these feelings towards the objects they would grow up with. This was an almost universal belief, save from some critics (Stearns 1997: 111). Stearns goes on saying that emotional satisfaction was fundamental for the process of purchases of the time, because it would intensify it and bring people to buy more and more. It was therefore even encouraged by those who wanted to sell as many products as possible. A very important emotion was jealousy, because it would push the desire to buy in order to keep up with others (Stearns 1997: 112). It is to be believed that people started to give additional meanings to simple objects, which resulted in those objects being able to be put somewhat at the center of the consumer's life, since they were source of "sensation, novelty, creativity, or religious verification", as a group of economists have theorized (Martin 1993: 144). Consumers sought these objects that could give them positive feelings and sensations. It became the objective of the merchandizer to present the objects giving them as much meaning and feeling as possible, in order to sell them to the "irrational purchasers" (Brown 2014: 67).

Stearns also brings up the fact that this new culture impacted the decisions people would take, such as how many children to have. They had to take into consideration the objects that were expected to be bought for the kid, and their capability to meet such demand (Stearns 1997: 12). This opposed to before, when parents only needed to buy the essential to take care of a child. Now, they also had to think about toys the kid would play

with, the dolls they would sleep with. All additional expenses that could be hard on the parents, and could bring them to decide to have one child less.

As we said, more and more aspects of life started to get commodified. One of them was beauty. Countless beauty products started to get advertised, urging women to buy them and presenting them as necessities, something they could not live without. Susannah Walker, in her book *Style and Status: Selling Beauty to African American Women, 1920-1975* states that "Advertisements, to begin with, attached deep emotional and social meanings to female appearance and, at base, claimed that intangibles like love, popularity, and beauty themselves could be bought" (Walker 2007: 6). It is now not news that advertisements would promote products with feelings and meanings attached to them, but in these cases these objects – that would make a woman beautiful – were essential for the value of the woman herself. The changes that consumerism brought were changes also in the image and presentation of women. The concept of beauty was irrevocably affected by it, and became something to sell to women in exchange for the benefits that it would bring (often a husband, a better place in society, or simply dignity). This is something I will explore further in this thesis.

Commodity culture also brought society to see the woman differently. She had become both consumer and commodity. As a matter of fact, countless advertisements used the image of the woman to sell – the ones of beauty products, but also house goods, clothes, and many more. According to Warren Susman, these representations "undermined belief in identity as essentially fixed in class, family, and social position". They had therefore an impact on the fixed beliefs of the society, and shook them. Regarded very highly were gender roles, in a time of changes, and these new roles women had as representations and commodities destabilized them (Susman in Roberts 1998: 843). We can see an example of woman as commodity in *Quicksand* by Nella Larsen. When the protagonist, Helga Crane, arrives in Copenhagen, she is a guest of the Dahls, her relatives. Starting immediately, she is treated as an object, paraded around the city in nice clothes, as an exotic thing to be admired. Here Helga, who had always had a strong relationship with commodities, surrounding herself with them, becomes a commodity

herself. Simone Weil Davis, in her book *Living Up to the Ads: Gender Fictions of the 1920s*, uses the term "vehicle" to indicate the woman used as a mean to sell, to advertise the product, often by standing with it (Weil Davis 2000).

1.3 Women's Role in Commodity Culture

By the 1920s, in America the woman was pictured as the primary consumer. She was the one who had the duty of purchasing what was necessary to take care of the husband and children by disposing of the family's money. Because of this, the products were specifically advertised to her. Advertisements were published in newspapers and women's magazines, because it was known that they were the ones that would decide what to purchase for the family, and were therefore the driving force of consumers, the main influence (Rosenberg 1999: 485). In her book *Selling Mrs. Consumer*, written in 1929, Christine Frederick paints a picture in which the man works so that his wife can spend his money in purchases for the family. In the houses of 1920s America, the woman would dispose of the family's money earned by the husband. In her book, Christine Frederick states that "Woman has never before attained, in any country, the psychological position that she enjoys in America" (Frederick 1929: 11). It was therefore a highly esteemed position, certainly much more desirable than the one of the women outside of America, or the ones of lower classes or non-white, who had to work to live. Although women used their husband's money on their purchases, Christine Frederick states that they would also use their own. "She is an astoundingly large owner of wealth and property," she affirms. And, "The majority of the stockholders of the largest corporations of the country are women […] 41% of the nation's individual wealth is in the hands of women" (Frederick 1929: 85). In families with higher income, the man took over this role, but not always. Nonetheless, Frederick specifies that this did not mean that women were on the same level as men. Quite the opposite: she affirms that "Woman is of course powerful largely because of her secondary position to man" (Frederick 1929: 15). At the end of the day, it was true that the woman was expected to dispose of the husband's money, but never "selfishly", for herself, but only so that she could take care of him and

the children. Mary Louise Roberts states that the consumption of the woman is never for herself, but in service of others, "vicarious" (Roberts 1998: 819).

Simone Weil Davis expresses how women, who were seen as the primary consumers, would express themselves through commodities. "The consumer, then and still conceived primarily as female, is supposed to manifest her 'rainbow moods' most entirely via the selection and purchase of commodities, the expressive lexicon from which she is to assemble and display her identity" (Weil Davis 2000: 2). This is clearly expressed in *Quicksand* by Nella Larsen. We see it in the protagonist Helga Crane's room in Naxos, where she teaches when the story starts. The very first page of the book describes said room, listing the objects that characterize it: the reading lamp, the Chinese carpet, the books, the shelves, the nasturtiums, the low table, the oriental silk. The text goes on by saying that "It was a comfortable room, furnished with rare and intensely personal taste […]" (Larsen 1928: 1). We can see here then how the commodities bought by Helga, who we would see in the story to be a strongly materialistic person, display her taste and her personality.

Given that the woman was the primary consumer, advertisements needed to cater to her. "Mrs. Consumer's choices set styles" states Christine Frederick (Frederick 1929: 7). Being the woman the one who would most likely buy for the family, she was the one who had the power to dictate the trends, and manufacturers had to bend to her will if they wanted to sell. Otherwise, the woman could exercise her power by simply not buying. Frederick presents the example of the women's preference for colorful cars, and how Henry Ford was forced to conform to this new preference. Otherwise, women would not buy from him anymore, since all the cars he sold were black (Frederick 1929).

Even though women were the primary consumers, that did not mean that advertisers and manufacturers saw them as rational or intelligent. If anything, they were widely regarded as emotional and easily manipulated. The woman was not someone who mostly relied on intellect and logic, but whose emotions had a huge role in choosing the next course of action. "Woman's purchases are exceedingly near to her instincts" writes

Christine Frederick (Frederick 1929: 44). This could be part of the reason why advertisers and manufacturers targeted women; because of the belief that they were more easily manipulated by advertisements and, by following their instincts, they would more likely buy without thinking. Christine Frederick states that men are "thoroughly ruled by their instincts and emotions", but to a smaller degree than women (Frederick 1929: 44). According to Victoria de Grazia, "the female consumer was a subject without will or agency, manipulated by commercial interests and diverted from political activism in her preoccupation with shopping" (de Grazia in Roberts 1998: 821).

Heike Paul, in her book *The Myths That Made America: An Introduction to American Studies*, reaffirms that women in this time were mostly seen as "consuming angels", given their role in the family as the one who would buy the products to take care of the family. She also states that "women entered [the newly emergent consumer economy] as customers and as male status symbols […] or not at all" (Paul 2014: 399). Women as male status symbols is also touched upon by Lindsey Turnbull in her master thesis "White And Black Womanhoods And Their Representations In 1920s American Advertising". She affirms that a man's masculinity depended in how well he could take care of his wife. In this consumerist setting, it referred to what the wife could buy with the husband's money (Turnbull 2012: 68). Mary Louise Roberts asserts that:

> […] the wife of a wealthy man must consume 'conspicuously', that is, purchase valuable goods for herself, her husband, and his household – goods that provide evidence of his wealth and dominance in a social hierarchy of invidious distinction. But by this very act of consumption, the wife also demonstrates her status as a property (Roberts 1998: 819).

The woman as someone in a domestic role, relegated inside the house, was portrayed in advertisements as well. There was a strong insistence on gender roles, in a time when women started working outside what was considered their expected place, the home. Advertisements, having great influence in society, portrayed women in these traditional roles, possibly in order to try to reestablish them (Turnbull 2012: 63). Women's traditional environment was the house, and advertising always took care of reminding it

to consumers. Any role the woman was supposed to have took place inside the home (taking care of the children, of the house itself, preparing the meals). Not only the woman was expected to work in the house, but she was also actively excluded from the life of the world outside, such as politics (de Grazia in Roberts 1998: 823). It was also a time in which women started to engage with the public sphere more and more, furthering their education in order to pursue new careers that were in contact with the public, and not isolated as they were, confined in their own home (Weil Davis 2000: 18). Many did not like this new development, deeming these women as "deficient single females", and as such they were represented in cinema as well. Ideally, the successful woman of the time would be the one to support the husband, content in her secondary role inside the home (Paul 2014: 402). Tradition wanted the woman to stay inside the home. Of course, all this concerned middle-class white women. Poor white women and non-white women had always had to work, for just the one, scarce income of the husband was not enough to support the whole family. Therefore, they had to sacrifice those traditional values (that never applied to non-white women, and had always only had in mind middle-class white women) in order to survive and provide for the family (Turnbull 2012). Women working was considered the norm, as long as they stayed inside the home. It was when they started to work outside, in contact with the public sphere that the issues began, for domesticity was a component of proper womanhood, as Turnbull states (Turnbull 2012: 56). Women who worked outside were criticized and shamed, even deemed as "not respectable" (Turnbull 2012: 57).

Emily Rosenberg, in her journal article "Consuming Women: Images of Americanization in the 'American Century'", talks about women's role during that time as well. She describes consumption as a "particularly female activity" and affirms that the woman who took part in this consuming culture was considered a "modern" woman, as consumption was equated with modernity (Rosenberg 1999: 482). Women have always been taken into consideration when assessing a country's modernity in the Western world: the role that they occupied in the society determined its level of modernization. Their representations played their part. Rosenberg takes into account for this role the "new woman". Rosenberg does not have a specific definition for her and considers several

options, from the "flapper" to the working woman. All of them distanced themselves from the traditional role of the woman, and indicated therefore a modernity in the country and, Rosenberg states, "symbolized the expansion of consumption, greater independence, and the power to command relatively unsupervised leisure time" (Rosenberg 1999). This role of the New Woman was rising in this time. She was the woman who detached herself from traditional views and roles, and got more involved with the life outside the home, something very frowned upon at the time. Lindsey Turnbull describes her as someone who "embodied the ideals of upward mobility, urbanization, corporatization and new possibilities for women" (Turnbull 2012: 54). It was obvious why she was frowned upon by a good number of the people of the time, the ones who wanted to preserve womanhood as they knew it, as the woman who took care of the family without the need to leave the home to work to do that. The New Woman did not want to give up the family or the role as a caretaker, rather she wanted to be able to do that as well as study and have a career of her own. This is something that non-white women and poor white women had always had to do, not having the privilege to only rely on one salary to maintain the family (Turnbull 2012). Emily Rosenberg states that "the 'new woman' became a preeminent symbol of the 'new era'" (Rosenberg 1999: 481). Mary Louise Roberts defines the New Women as "a group of bourgeois women who rejected domesticity in order to pursue radical lifestyles" (Roberts 1998: 843). She states that their focus was on performing identity rather than actually act on their apparent beliefs, "emphasis on *being seen as someone* over and above actually *being someone*" (Roberts 1998: 843).

Rosenberg writes: "Above all, the 'modern' woman in America was defined as the woman who consumed; who had the power, through purchasing, to change her image and, by doing so, possibly to change her life as well" (Rosenberg 1999: 482). We already saw how the woman per se was an indicator of modernity: according to her position in society, always secondary to the men, but still highly considered (namely, in charge of the purchases and not doing any manual labor outside of the house), the advancement of the society would be judged. Considering America, only white, non-working-class women were relevant for this. Black women had always had to work to live, and were never considered modern or advanced, rather the opposite. Moreover, in a consumerist society,

of course a central place was occupied by the act of purchasing. It was now something so interconnected with day-to-day life that people could not do without. It is only natural that women and consuming had this close-knit relation, where it was now the woman's job to actively partake in the consumerist society.

As I have already mentioned, not all women benefited from the same position: their roles also depended on their skin color. White women and black women had very different positions in society, so a distinction has to be made when talking about this issue. While the new consumerist society was portrayed as a modern one, black people were denied that definition, no matter how much they contributed as consumers. In advertisements made by white producers they were shown as less than, always in service of white families. Black women especially, in an age in which beauty was regarded as fundamental, were considered unable to be attractive, thus effectively leaving them behind (Turnbull 2012: 62). Rosenberg writes: "The lives of American women widely varied along the lines of race, class, region, age, and temperament" (Rosenberg 1999: 490). And yet, the only women under the spotlight were the white, middle-class ones, with a husband with a good job, nice children, beautiful, and, most of all, with enough money to spend on non-essential purchases. They were the ones depicted in advertisements and who represented the America of the time.

The fact that women started working more outside the home, thus interacting with the public sphere more, had an impact on consumerism and advertising as well. It gave a reason for manufacturers to push cosmetics and beauty products more, with the excuse that if a woman wanted to interact with the public she had to be at her best form. Consumerism itself had a role in women interacting with the outside world, as they were the ones who would purchase for the family. Lindsey Turnbull mentions the rise of the "cult of feminine beauty" because of this (Turnbull 2012: 58). Beauty became a priority for women of that time, with advertisements pushing for it, as well as literature. "Modern beauty culture advertising and advice literature insisted that beauty was the natural prerogative of women" states Susannah Walker (Walker 2007: 34). She also affirms that "Promotional literature insisted that beauty was necessary for popularity and sexual

attractiveness" (Walker 2007: 34). Beauty was fundamental for women if they wanted to achieve anything, from finding a husband to being at peace with themselves. Anne Anlin Cheng writes "Beauty as a phenomenon is provoked by and encourages the process of comparison" (Cheng 2000: 209). Comparison is most likely one of the reasons why beauty culture provokes such anxiety in women. She also writes "The aesthetic/philosophical truth of beauty is value" (Cheng 2000: 204). This identifies beauty as sort of a currency within the society of the time: in exchange of beauty a woman could obtain a husband, self-esteem, a good social position, all of which could not be obtained without beauty. We can also find evidence of the importance of beauty in the literary work *The House of Mirth* by Edith Wharton, written in 1905. Here the protagonist Lily Bart's beauty is highlighted time and time again, even by Lily herself. She prides herself of it, and it is her main tool for reaching her goal: find a rich husband. In a society in which women's power was very limited, and rarely detached from a man, it is urgent for Lily, an unmarried twenty-nine-years-old woman, to find a wealthy husband, someone who could take care of her. In chapter 26, Lily mentions being brought up by her mother "to be ornamental". This was the role of the middle-class white woman of the time, to be beautiful and take care of the house, the husband, and the children. It might also be in reference to her beauty, her main, and for many only, appeal. Something that would get her what she wanted in life.

Chapter 2: Beauty Culture

2.1 Ideals of Beauty

We have seen how beauty played an essential role in American society. Susannah Walker writes that "By the 1920s and 1930s, selling beauty was an integral part of the consumer society that had come to dominate American culture" (Walker 2007: 28). Every woman by then had to put a lot of thought in their appearance, much more than before, and advertisements would present them with the tools to do so, along with the reasons why it was necessary that they did it.

American historian Kathy Peiss, talking about America's domestic beauty industry of the early twentieth century, writes in an article: "The emergent American look – visible in the Gibson Girls and the New Woman [which] conveyed an image that was natural, youthful, healthy and wholesome" (Peiss 2002 in Alexander 2015: 9). However, beauty was not "in the eye of the beholder", rather it was at the mercy of a strict definition and set of rules that every woman had to follow to be considered attractive. Those standards of beauty followed closely Eurocentric features, therefore rejecting black women once again. Once more, we see how women's sole existence was inevitably intertwined with race in every aspect of their life. It is important to understand that beauty ideals have changed in the course of time. "The meanings of race and gender shifted throughout American history in order to serve perceived social needs" writes Lindsey Turnbull (Turnbull 2012: 4), and "Perceptions of what it means to be a black or white woman have differed, historically" (Turnbull 2012: 5). Despite this, the white woman always kept her place on top of the "beauty hierarchy".

Because of the now widespread consumerism, techniques and products were incessantly presented to women to quell their worries. Make-up, for example, is something that could assist women of the time. "[…] kitchen appliances, ready-to-wear women's clothing, and cosmetics had become powerful American icons of freedom"

according to Emily Rosenberg (Rosenberg 1999: 488). Women had to keep in mind its nuances, however. Peiss brings up the importance that Western culture attributes to the face, as "particularly meaningful", the body part that better represents the person. Therefore, since it is such a clear depiction of the interior world of a person, covering it with cosmetics would be considered as insincere and misleading. This is an ideology from the nineteenth century that bled through 1920s American society (Peiss 1996 in Alexander 2015: 5). A solution to this is presented in "Consuming Beauty: Mass-Market Magazines and Make-up in the 1920s" by Rachael Alexander, who mentions the advertisements in the *Ladies' Home Journal*, which proposed the beauty products as something that would enhance women's natural beauty, and not change the way they look (Alexander 2015: 6). That is what was considered "appropriate make-up", something that would emphasize the beauty that the woman already had (Alexander 2015: 7). Therefore, a woman was not supposed to look like she had any make-up on, as the encouraged cosmetics were only supposed to be an aid, and the woman's natural beauty had to be in the focus. Despite this, beauty products were still depicted as necessary to achieve the status of "beautiful". (Alexander 2015:9). Without consumption, a woman was destined to remain unattractive, and thus supposedly unable to achieve what was most important in life.

The ideals of beauty were white ideals, and even black women had to follow them if they wanted to integrate in society. There was a "right" way to be a woman, and it was the one conforming to middle-class white womanhood, complying to gender roles, having kids, managing to take care of the home, adhering to the standards of beauty. Black women's magazines pushed black women to follow this standard of life, if only to escape as much as possible the unbearable racism that permeated society (Turnbull 2012). In her journal article "Aesthetic Resistance to Commercial Influences: The Impact of the Eurocentric Beauty Standard on Black College Women", Dia Sekayi writes: "Typically, however, standards of beauty are dictated by others through the media, cultural traditions, fashion trends, and emanate from anywhere, it seems, but one's own eye" (Sekayi 2003: 467). Given how wildly popular white publications were, it was no surprise the amount of influence they had on society, coupled with the already well-established standards of beauty. "African American beauty is the antithesis of White beauty, 'White' hair, and

‘White’ norms” states Tracey Owens Patton in her journal article “Hey Girl, Am I More than My Hair? African American Women and Their Struggles with Beauty, Body Image, and Hair” (Owens Patton 2006: 36). It is impossible to talk about beauty standards without talking about race, as the two are inevitably interconnected. Dia Sekayi states that “Historically, [the media] did not frequently include people of African descent among the ranks of the beautiful. When Black women were (and are) presented, they typically met (and meet) Eurocentric ideals in terms of body type, skin color, and hair texture” (Sekayi 2003). No matter when, American ideals of beauty have always been Eurocentric: light skin, straight hair, small nose, thin body. There might have been some variations in history, but overall, the ideals never strayed too much from these standards.

Anne Anlin Cheng considers the way in which beauty culture was used to control women’s bodies (Cheng 2000: 191). Given the tendency of beauty culture to regard some bodies higher compared to others, and considering how whiteness and “white features” were viewed as superior in the realm of beauty as well, we can easily deem beauty culture as another way to discriminate and dismiss women of color. Their bodies being considered ugly regardless, in a time in which physical attractiveness was of the utmost importance, meant that they had yet another disadvantage in society.

White and black women have always been put on opposing ends. As Turnbull explains, with whiteness being seen as the default, something presumed, everyone else was left to be considered as “other”. Blackness is what whiteness is not (Turnbull 2012). As whiteness was the standard of beauty followed by the society, that automatically regarded blackness as not-beautiful, ugly. Save for the black press, magazines too presumed whiteness as the standard. This confirmed the estimated view of society, where non-white people were invisible at best (Turnbull 2012: 48). Therefore, it is of no surprise that the standards of beauty followed that route as well. Tracey Owens Patton mentions: “Adherence to White beauty standards also can be traced throughout the centuries” (Owens Patton 2006: 30). While this is true, it must also be considered that these same beauty standards have varied a lot in time, though still remaining in the realm of white beauty. From the same text, many different ideals have been in vogue, from the flattened

chest, to the accentuated breasts, hips, and buttocks, to the slim waist, to a bigger weight, to many others. "[…] in the 1920s slender legs, hips, and small breasts were popular" (Owens Patton 2006: 31). Not only was whiteness held high, but blackness was put down at the same time. Talking about white advertising, Lindsey Turnbull writes: "All of the black women featured in these ads wear an apron and do not wear contemporary fashions" (Turnbull 2012: 88). Advertisements thus helped reinforce the idea that black women could never be considered to be on the same level as white women, as they were inherently inferior to them.

2.2 Beauty and Race

We can already find this contrast at the time of slavery, when the praise of white women came at the expense and because of the criticism of black women. Every quality of the white woman corresponded to a flaw of the black woman. For example, Lindsey Turnbull discusses purity, something associated with white women and deemed unknown to black women (Turnbull 2012: 96). The promiscuity and oversexualization of black women are something that persists to this day. This is a stereotype that served to disparage them even further, and somewhat justify the abuse that was and is perpetrated against them, all while uplifting their white counterpart as pure, composed, and chaste. This contrast and comparison can also be found in advertising, for race was ubiquitous. Even without featuring black women, blackness was still present in white advertisements, if only as something to avoid and abhor. White women were encouraged to use cosmetics such as skin bleaches to avoid looking too dark. Likewise, although white women were not present in black advertisements, whiteness was still there, as something to aspire to and imitate, as it was the ideal beauty (Walker 2007: 45). It was believed by wealthy black families that, by imitating and aspiring to whiteness, one could finally be able to integrate in society among white people. They strived for assimilation that, as Lindsey Turnbull explains, "meant accepting, or at least acknowledging the preconceived, negative constructions of blackness by suggesting those constructions must be refuted" (Turnbull 2012: 97).

Since the beginning of black beauty culture, black women have been subjected to white ideals of beauty. These ideals demeaned black bodies and appearance, and their differences from their white counterparts were treated as flaws, going as far as asserting that they spoke of the inferiority that black people supposedly inherently had. The closer black women got in appearance to white women, the more attractive they were considered. They were therefore better seen in society, though they could not fully integrate. Even among the African American community, black advertisers pushed white beauty standards (Lindsey 2011). The relationship with beauty itself is different for a black woman compared to a white woman, states Anne Anlin Cheng. She affirms that "The effects produced by the intersection of race, gender, and aesthetics are not merely additive, but interlocking and, at times, contradictory" (Cheng 2000: 192). Therefore, we must take into consideration the relationship between beauty, blackness, and womanhood in that unique combination that is being a woman of color. Her experience cannot be comparable to the one of the white woman, for their difference in race is fundamental for their exposure to the world. In the same way, the experiences of the black man and the black woman cannot be compared, as gender is a fundamental as well. As Anne Anlin Cheng discusses, for a black woman beauty "is worth nothing and everything": in a society in which only white beauty is admired, black beauty is hardly acknowledged or appreciated. On the other hand, for a woman beauty is everything, supposedly something that can open any door (Cheng 2000: 205). African American women tried to find a place for themselves in this beauty culture that did everything to exclude them. They attempted to broaden the horizon of beauty standards so that they could fit in the definition of "beautiful" of the time, which had always denigrated them (Walker 2007: 3).

The beauty industry became extremely widespread in the African American community, with even white businesses catering to them (Walker 2007: 7). However, not everyone was pleased by this. Beauty culture was controversial too, as those who participated tended to adhere to the standards already in place, and were therefore accused of "wanting to look white". In turn, those women responded that they were just using certain products in order to tend to their hair, and that it had nothing to do with whiteness. (Walker 2007: 9). Black beauty culture can be considered more complex than its white

counterpart. While it promoted beauty in black women, as they were denied this treatment from the masses, for whom beauty corresponded with whiteness, it also often affirmed the superiority of "white features", such as straight hair and light skin, something that sparked controversies within the community (Walker 2007: 29). When it came to beauty products, white companies advertised to black consumers as well in great quantities, putting at risk the futures of black-owned businesses by taking up their space and making profits at their expenses (Walker 2007: 13). This did not correspond to a higher regard paid in respect of the African American community, however. On the contrary, they were, if anything, just another thing to mercilessly exploit to make money. As a matter of fact, these same companies also discriminated against them when hiring (Walker 2007: 14).

Advertisements had a great role as well. With their representations, or lack thereof, they communicated accurately the visions of the society, and at the same time influenced it. Simone Weil Davis states: "The models for subjectivity generated by the nationalized commercial endeavor also performed racial work, helping to universalize and even celebritize an implicit middle-class whiteness in the presumed audience […] every 'you' addressed was assumed to be white, and nonwhite figures were almost invariably servants" (Weil Davis 2000: 4). This fueled the already widespread belief that African Americans were inescapably inferior to white people. They were rendered almost invisible in the eyes of the white society, something on the background made solely to serve them. This was a view commonly shared among advertisers, who based themselves of their personal experience, as mentioned also by Susannah Walker (Walker 2007: 12).

Since race was inextricably tied with the concept of beauty in a way or another, this was bound to manifest through advertisements too. Cosmetics and products were sold to white women to make their natural beauty shine, and, in a more implicit way, detach themselves as much as possible from the appearance of black women. On the other hand, black women were sold cosmetics and products that would make them resemble whiteness as much as possible. Skin-bleaching creams and hair-straighteners were extremely popular items. Advertisements portrayed African Americans as deeply flawed, and put them in contrast with the white society. Lindsey Turnbull states that "These

racialized and oppressive visual representations flourished because the images shown were accepted as legitimate" (Turnbull 2012: 15). We can therefore see the influence advertisements had on society, and how they reassured the elevated position of white people at the expense of the black community. It is not hard to imagine how this impacted black women's capability to be beautiful in the eyes of the society, something already difficult to obtain for them, as per the beauty ideals agreed-upon. However, there were also black advertisements, that had a different perspective. In these advertisements, black women could be beautiful too, and products were sold to make sure it would happen (Turnbull 2012: 110).

Another difference we must keep in mind between how black and white women presented themselves was that black women had to take into account the countless stereotypes they were subjected to. For example, in her journal article "Black Cosmofeminism: Commodity, Sexuality, and the Transnational Mixed-Race Subject in Nella Larsen's Quicksand", Hsiao-Wen Chen mentions the encouragement directed to black women not to wear bright colors and to be mindful of their behavior, as otherwise they would feed on the stereotype of the promiscuous black woman (Higginbotham 1992 in Chen 2023: 149). Chen highlights the instance in which that is depicted in *Quicksand*, where the dean of the school in Naxos directs the students to wear muted colors (Chen 2023: 149). It is most likely that these regulations added another layer to the already suffocating restrictions imposed on "true womanhood", limiting black women further in their journey to express their beauty, detached from the already imposed beauty standards.

Not only in advertisements were African American representations stereotyped, but overall in performances. In "The Commodification of Aesthetic Feeling: Race, Sexuality, and the 1920s Stage Model" racialized performance styles are described as characterized by "exaggerated motions and expressions – 'eccentric' dance styles marked by arms and legs akimbo, staring eyes, and clown smiles" all tied together with the usage of blackface (Brown 2014: 73). They were a clear parody of the dances performed in the African American community, using racist tropes and tools to discredit them and the people who performed them. An example of performance featuring black people is in *Quicksand*. It

happens when Helga Crane is in Denmark, on an evening in which she goes to the Circus. There, she assists to a performance of two black men, who dance and sing old American songs. Helga describes their performance as a loud, messy display, as they are "pounding their thighs, slapping their hands together, twisting their legs, waving their abnormally long arms, throwing their bodies about with a loose ease" (Larsen 1928: 183). Here the insecurities and the complex feelings Helga harbors towards her own community come into play in her harsh judgment. In a time and a society in which black bodies were seen as something ridiculous and to make fun of at best, how could they be considered as beautiful? It was something inconceivable, something that the various stereotypes (Tracey Owens Patton mentions "the oversexed jezebel, the tragic mulatto, and the mammy figure") aided in stifling. Owens Patton also states that "the notions of Black beauty and Black inferiority are inextricably bound" (Owens Patton 2006: 26). Given their inherent inferior position in society, it was an absurd thought to compare their beauty to the one of white women, let alone think that it might be superior. While black press promoted black beauty, their magazines presented "'appropriate' urban behaviors, dress and lifestyle" a new migrant should have. This way, black elites hoped to appear respectable and keep their position in the eyes of the white society (Turnbull 2012: 94). Thus, they could have more possibilities in not being regarded as inferior anymore, and have their beauty appreciated.

2.3 Beauty and Social Status

As already stated, beauty was of the utmost importance for women, especially at the time. It was the tool they needed to get what they wanted in life, such as a husband, and therefore children and a nice house. This is what beauty advertisements suggested, as they pushed for and insisted on the importance of and the need for the products they sold. They reiterated the weight beauty had in a woman's life, and how beauty products were fundamental so that she could get the most out of it. They highlighted the importance of beauty, putting it as the first of a woman's worries. These advertisements sold a solution to these worries, and an aid for women, so that they could bring out their beauty and be happy (Walker 2007: 29). It was also how these advertisements sold their products: rather

than focusing on the product itself, they spotlighted what a woman could achieve by using them and therefore improving herself with their help. Very often the prospect of finding a husband or making themselves attractive for the male attention was a strong point, as well as being presentable in the eyes of the public (Walker 2007: 30). Kathy Peiss mentions that these new perspectives convinced customers that beauty was something achievable for everyone, as long as they purchased the right products, and that if a woman was not beautiful, that was solely her fault (Peiss in Walker 2007: 30). Not only advertisements, but magazines too sold this idea of the top priority that beauty and self-improvement had to have in a woman's life. "In the modern scene of the 1920s, vision was 'privileged above other senses' […] appearance – particularly feminine appearance – became more important than ever" writes Rachael Alexander (Alexander 2015: 3). For a great amount of effort to be put in their appearance was by then something expected from women, another one of their duties.

Being able to follow beauty standards was fundamental for someone who wanted to be able to have a high social status. "A race's 'civility' was determined by how well they conformed to white, middle-class gender roles" writes Lindsey Turnbull (Turnbull 2012: 11). Therefore, for women it meant to manage to follow the strict beauty standards of the time. Those were considered the people who could stay at the top of the society. Conforming to beauty ideals opened many doors. For example, based on their appearance, some women could get jobs more easily and more often (Owens Patton 2006: 36). Black women were urged to imitate whiteness, what was considered attractive, and many products that would help them achieve that look were being promoted. Lighter skin was considered a way to climb the social ladder (Lindsey 2011: 103). It held many privileges, as it was one of the closest ways a black woman could get to white beauty. It is something that can be found also back at the time of slavery, when lighter-skinned black women were taken to work inside the house, while darker-skinned black women (and with overall more black features) were relegated to field work, much heavier and more tiring (Owens Patton: 26). As well as light skin, straight hair was also a deciding factor in the beauty of a woman, and could play a role in the possibility of finding a job (Owens Patton 2006:

29). The hairstyles that did not fit into the standard were considered unprofessional, and were frowned upon, especially when it came to the workplace.

The state of the society imposed a racial inequality that put white individuals on top in every aspect, among which beauty, and African Americans inevitably under them. Cultural symbols that supported this ideology maintained this order (Owens Patton 2006: 36). Given that this was the situation, it was near impossible for black women to be considered anywhere near their white counterpart, and this included the concept of beauty. Every feature that was natural to the black woman was considered the antithesis of beauty: dark skin instead of white, kinky hair instead of straight. If they wanted to be considered beautiful by the society at large, which would have possibly given them more opportunities for them, they had to change themselves in some way. By lightening their skin or straightening their hair, or by finding clothes that suited them according to general standards. Many black-owned companies, through their advertisements, promoted their products so as to start racial uplift (Walker 2007: 9). They advocated for women attending to themselves as a way to improve significantly their lives, not only for the action per se, but because it could help them to climb the social ladder and get a better life for themselves.

It is relevant for this discussion the phenomenon of passing, which is when a person of a certain category can pass for another. For example, sometimes mixed-race people managed to pass as white. In this case, I would like to consider the cases in which mixed-race women passed as white and married white men. In 2021, Nella Larsen's novel, *Passing*, was adapted into a movie, and there we can find an example of this: the main character Irene's childhood friend, Clare, is a mixed-race black woman who lives her life as a white woman. She has a white, deeply racist husband, and a daughter. During their first encounter after many years, Clare states that that life is worth the price of keeping her real identity a secret, and is surprised that Irene, who could pass as white as well, married a black man instead. Living as a white woman was in some aspects safer: it protected from racism, especially in a time of everyday lynchings of black people. There was, however, the chance of being found out. Clare tells her friend that her pregnancy had

been a nightmare, worried as she was that her child could be born with dark skin. Merely the fact that some women were willing to take that risk, especially considering that there was a non-zero possibility that they could birth children with dark skin, showed the difference in treatment white and black women received. Thus, we can see the need of black women to conform to what society wanted.

A woman's attention to her own appearance was what corresponded with success. An attractive woman was a successful woman (Paul 2014). We can juxtapose this with the narrative of the self-made man. While an accomplished man, who reached success through his willpower and hard work, had his realization recognized in terms of how much money he managed to make, or what kind of position he occupied in society, an accomplished woman was evaluated strictly through her appearance and physical beauty. Moreover, a she was generally not a woman by herself, rather she was at her husband's side, supporting him in his road to success (Paul 2014: 402). Magazines too transmitted those same messages, by pushing women to be thoughtful of their personal appearance, putting great effort in it and making it their primary priority, in order to fulfill her role and find a husband (Alexander 2014: 4). She was supposed to make him appear great, and her appearance reflected on him. There was also the idea that this kind of worry for personal appearance was something that had always been mostly associated with the upper class (Alexander 2015: 3). So, there was yet another correlation between beauty and an advantaged life. In order to get people to consume more, companies represented in their advertisements a higher standard of living, so that consumers would be inspired in living that life, supposedly achievable by purchasing the products advertised (Turnbull 2012: 49). The same happened in beauty advertisements. Watching them, women would allegedly put more effort in their appearance and – with the aid of the product advertised – improve themselves and pursue the life and beauty represented. These advertisements represented a "better life", something that the female consumers could strive for and that could inspire them to better themselves to reach it (Alexander 2015: 7). Coincidentally, this self-improvement coincided with the use of the products in order to improve their appearance. Thus, beauty was synonym with a better life, that could be reached by any

woman who was willing to put in the effort in their appearance and shape herself into something that was widely accepted and appreciated.

Chapter 3: Aspects of Beauty

3.1 Skin

There were several aspects by which beauty was evaluated. One of the most important ones was skin. Just considering that based on how light or dark a woman's skin was she was treated differently, we can already see how that is the case. Skin was regarded more appealing the lighter it was. Even if advertisers denied whiteness as the ultimate goal, they constantly promoted skin bleaches, and the ambition was a lighter skin (Walker 2007: 38). Products for skin, along with those for hair, were often marketed by women to women in the black community as something that would help them go against the stereotypes they were subjected to, and that would make them respectable (Roberts 1998: 842).

I have taken into analysis advertisements from different magazines from the 1920s, such as the McCall's Magazine, The American Magazine, The Saturday Evening Post – white publications meant for a white audience – and The Half-Century Magazine – a black publication meant for a black audience. Depending on the magazine, different types of advertisements can be found. Beauty products are advertised in all of them, in different amounts. In all of them, however, roughly the same aspects are focused on: skin, hair, hygiene.

Regarding skin, every advertisement that targeted it had the same objectives in mind, and used them to promote their products, promising to achieve what the consumer wanted. Something heavily focused on was the softness of the skin. Many advertisements mentioned it, promising to make the skin softer. Adjectives such as "tender", "velvety", "pliant" were used, to really convey the idea of the desired feeling of the skin. Roughness was deprecated, and products were meant to be used to avoid it and bring the skin to a perception that was more desired and accepted. In relation to this, the protection of the skin was another goal of the beauty products advertised. Skin products were promoted as

a protection against the sun, the wind, and anything that could damage the skin. Furthermore, youth was something skin products aspired to as well. They promised in several advertisements to help the skin stay youthful, and that using that product women would look young, as youth was associated with beauty. Of course, many advertisements also promoted products to whiten the skin, both to white women and to black women. Skin bleach was a very popular product, produced by different brands and promoted in different magazines.

Figure 1 Rozol Face Bleach, *The Half-Century Magazine*, Sep. 1921

We can see an example in the advertisement for Rozol Face Bleach [Fig. 1]. This product, other than lightening the skin as the name suggests, also ensures to remove any imperfections of the skin, which can be many. The advertisement is simple; it only shows the product, and lists the flaws that it can remove. It is not less effective for this. In a society in which it was essential to conform to the beauty standards put in place, even the simplest advertisements could be successful, as long as they promised what a woman needed. What is more, the Overton-Hygienic Company specifically produced products directed to the African American community. Therefore, this advertisement was directed

to people who had an even harder time, and sold them the possibility to integrate in society, if only just a little, starting to conform to the beauty standards put in place. A lighter skin was what was considered beautiful, and the imperfections only caused someone to stand out like a sore thumb. In a way, this product could be an aid in solving their problems.

Figure 2 Hinds Cream, *The American Magazine*, Jan. 1920

In this advertisement for Hinds Cream [Fig. 2] it is proposed a way to protect the skin against the weather outside and to make it captivating and delectable. The advertisement mentions how the traits of the skin a woman should strive for are "cleanliness and softness". The advertisement starts with putting the woman outside the house, and in a crowd, where she would be under the scrutinizing gaze of dozens of people. Therefore, she should worry about her own appearance, and about how her complexion appears. It is pushing women to put the concern for their appearance on top of their worries, as it was expected then. By implying that she would be under observation every time she stepped outside the house, it means that the woman should always aim to be perfect. In this advertisement there is not a picture of the product, but of a woman. She is dressed nicely, has jewelry on, make-up, and her hair is styled to perfection. This is

essentially the look women should pursue, and it is implied that they could do so by purchasing Hinds Cream. Anyone could achieve that, as Hinds Cream is “a safe, sure, and economical way”.

Figure 3 Pompeian Beauty Powder, *McCall's Magazine*, Nov. 1920

Pompeian Beauty Powder [Fig. 3] promotes youth, and claims to have the ability to make any woman look several years younger. To achieve that, it is presented a complete

process, which is only possible by acquiring various items from the same producer. By following these steps, and purchasing the right products, women can achieve the wished for youthful look. This advertisement manages to sell several different products and to make sure that women would buy all of them by explaining that they could only have the intended effect if used one after the other. Only this way they could reach the intended effect. They could be used separately, but together they formed the "Pompeian Beauty Toilette". Each one of them had a different use, and by utilizing them together they would strengthen the effect of the others.

3.2 Hair

Hair was another aspect that was heavily focused on in beauty culture. It was one of the major differences between white women and black women, and it held a significant meaning for the latter. It was, among other things, a testament of the struggle and discrimination the African American community has always had to face. Any kind of hairstyle that strayed from straight hair was deemed unacceptable, and black women would face real-life consequences for daring to style their hair in a way that would get closer to their culture. It could cost them their job, for example, or it could lead them to never getting hired in the first place (Walker 2007: 2). Many advertisements presented it as a flaw that needed to be fixed, others celebrated it, but both promoted tools and products that would change it, such as hair-straighteners (the same that happened with black skin) (Walker 2007: 38).

In the advertisements of the 1920s, it was often considered the color of the hair. Youth was a sought-after aspect in beauty, and this reflected in hair too. Everything a woman was supposed to want was to get rid of any sign of age, which, in this case, was gray hair. Grayness in a woman's hair was the definitive sign that she was not in her prime anymore, and that her beauty was fading. Many products promised to remedy that, and to give the color back to the hair, thus rejuvenating any woman who would use the product. Another beauty standard for hair in that time was its volume and fluffiness. Thick hair was preferred, and women would use products in order to achieve that. As for black

women, the advertisements regarding hair products were different under certain aspects. In The Half-Century Magazine, for example, many advertisements were from the Winona Hair Emporium. They advertised combs and switches, hair extensions that women could attach to their head in order to create hairstyles without having to cut or otherwise style their hair. In addition to these advertisements, there were those who promoted shampoos or hair growers as well.

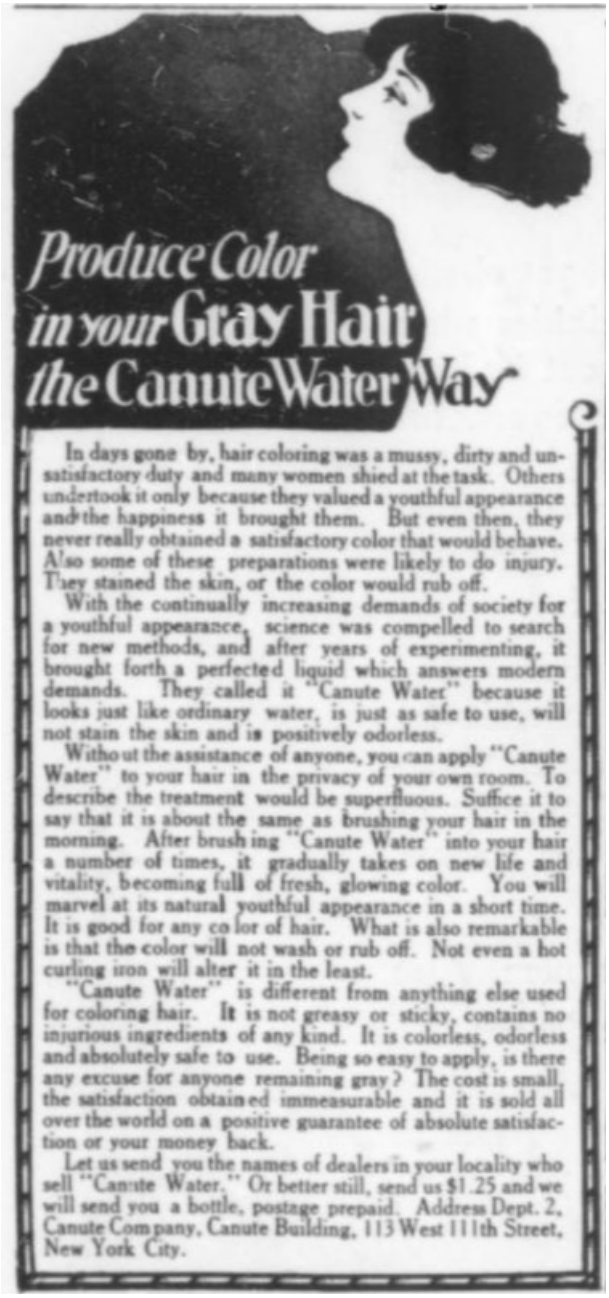


Figure 4 Canute Water Way, *McCall's Magazine*, Oct. 1920

The advertisement of Canute Water Way [Fig. 4] states that, before the existence of this product, hair care was something bothersome, that women avoided. Some did it despite the struggle, because they valued a lot the results, even though they could not obtain excellent outcomes. This advertisement mentions the happiness derived from a younger appearance, once again connecting a woman's happiness with her image. The

Canute Water is promoted as an innovative product, result of scientific research, and inherently better than anything else on the market. There are some elementary instructions on its use, but it is presented as such a simple task that they are considered unnecessary. This speaks of the accessibility of the item, not only simple to use, but also safe and easily acquirable. The advertisement says "Being so easy to apply, is there any excuse for anyone remaining gray?" once again shifting the blame on women in the circumstance that they were not attractive. In case they had gray hair, they were the ones to blame, as they did not have any excuse not to color them anymore. With this product, they now had an easy way to fulfill their duty and appear conventionally attractive and presentable to the public.

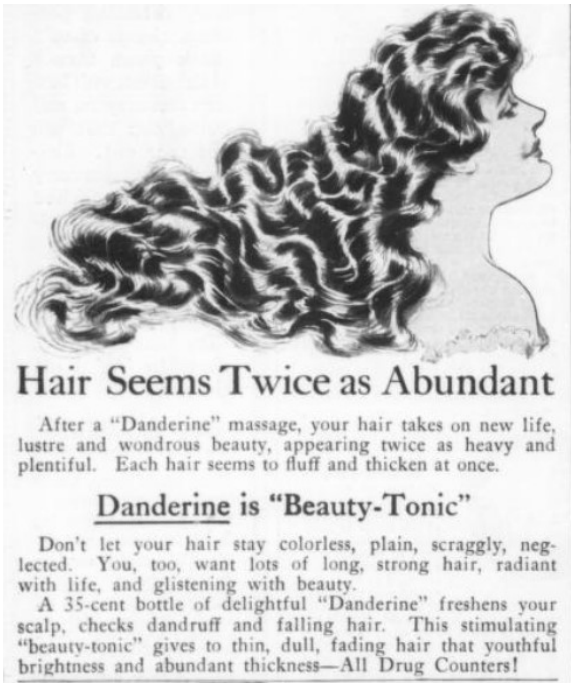


Figure 5 Danderine, *McCall's Magazine*, Oct. 1920

In this Danderine advertisement [Fig. 5] we are presented with another standard for beautiful hair. With this product there is the promise for the hair to look more voluminous and thicker. The advertisement urges women to act upon their hair, "Don't let your hair stay colorless, plain, scraggly, neglected". It once again holds women accountable for the state of their hair, and assures them that they do not want to neglect it, and that they want

it beautiful and glowing. It was taken for granted that that was what a woman wanted, as hair was an important factor in a woman's beauty. If a woman did not use this product, her hair would be plain, uninviting, and untended, and that would be her failing. Since now hair care was so accessible, there was no excuse for a woman to have an unkept appearance.

Figure 6 The Winona Hair Emporium, *The Half-Century Magazine*, Nov. 1920

The Winona Hair Emporium often advertised switches and puffs, as well as combs, such as in this advertisement [Fig. 6]. In The Half-Century Magazine, hair accessories and articles had a lot of space in advertisements, much more than in magazines directed to white women. There were several advertisements for combs, among which there were

the advertisements from The Winona Hair Emporium. This company sold these accessories, which allowed black women to style their hair and follow the most recent trends without the need to cut it. They could therefore more easily take care of their hair, all while try to conform to beauty standards, by styling it in a way that was in fashion at the time. There were several different options, so women could change their hair more freely, also without needing to make their hair undergo irreversible changes.

3.3 Hygiene

There was also an increased focus on hygiene at the time. How much a community was considered clean or hygienic was another way of discrimination. By considering a certain group of people dirtier, it also meant considering them behind and less advanced. This sort of belief was applied to Africans in nineteenth century, because they employed another method of cleaning, that involved oil instead of soap. Hygiene was an important condition of femininity too, and therefore another key aspect of womanhood (Roberts 1998: 834). In the 1920s, many advertisements focused on this aspect of personal care as well.

Among published advertisements for hygiene products, popular were those for soap and toothpaste. The advertisements for soap interlaced personal hygiene with beauty. Other than protecting the skin and leaving it healthy and clean, a soap was also supposed to get rid of imperfections and flaws, such as blackheads or blotches, and to keep the skin young and fresh. All this made a woman more attractive since, as already mentioned, skin was a great factor in a woman's beauty. Very present were also advertisements for toothpastes, which urged customers to buy their product in order to prevent the teeth from decaying and contracting diseases. An example, often mentioned and guarded against, was pyohrrea (or periodontitis), a disease that affects the gums and that can lead to several unpleasant consequences, often listed in advertisements that promoted toothpastes supposedly capable to prevent it. Toothpastes were often advertised as the solution to problems that the consumers would get if they did not utilize the product.

The Cosmetics of Cleopatra

HOW did Cleopatra wash her face? What cleansers did she use? Did she enhance her beauty with cosmetics?

Hieroglyphic records prove that while the finish of the royal toilet may have been rouging with carmine or vermilion, thorough, radiant cleanliness was always the foundation.

And the cleaners?—Palm and Olive oils—the same rare oils which produce a famous toilet soap today.

Remember that rouge and powder are harmless enough when applied to a clean skin and profit by the beauty secret of Cleopatra.

Wash your face with the same bland, beneficial cleansers the beauty-loving queen employed — scientifically combined in mild, soothing Palmolive.

Wash away imperfections

Work up a profuse thick lather from this gentlest of all soaps. Massage it thoroughly into every pore.

Don't be afraid of irritation—Palmolive is mild as cream. Rub gently, of course, for you must not roughen the delicate texture of the skin. Then rinse carefully in pleasantly warm water and end with a dash in cold.

This simple beauty treatment washes away imperfections. The Palmolive lather carries off dirt, excessive oil secretions, dead skin and the traces of rouge and powder which otherwise clog up the pores. No foreign substances are left to poison the skin with disfiguring blotches and imperfections.

If your skin is inclined to dryness apply Palmolive Cold Cream before you begin washing. This supplements the natural oil that keeps it smooth and supple.

If we made Palmolive in small quantities—

It would necessarily be a very expensive soap. Palm and Olive oils are costly and come from overseas.

But we import them in enormous volume and the Palmolve factories work day and night.

This gigantic production reduces cost and the price of Palmolive is no more than ordinary soaps. It is within the reach of all for every toilet purpose, the greatest of modern luxuries.

Palmolive is sold by dealers everywhere. It is made by

THE PALMOLIVE COMPANY, Milwaukee, U. S. A.
The Palmolive Company of Canada, Limited, Toronto, Ontario

PALMOLIVE

PALMOLIVE

Why men have the best skins

Not from care, you may be sure. Men are through when they have used plenty of soap and water. Yet most men have finer and firmer skin than the average woman. And they usually look younger.

Soap and water is the answer—soap for thorough cleansing, water to harden and invigorate. Fine soap, of course, soap that cleanses without harshness. Preferably soap that is made from Palm and Olive oil—mild, soothing Palmolive.

Women may safely use rouge and powder if they will first thoroughly wash the face with mild, gentle Palmolive.

Figure 7 Palmolive, *McCall's Magazine*, Oct. 1920

This advertisement for Palmolive soap [Fig. 7] starts with a direct reference to Cleopatra, a woman renowned for her power and beauty, and therefore someone to aspire to. Here, it is asked how she achieved her beauty, what did she use to take care of her face and skin. It is stated that the basis of her beauty was most of all the cleanliness of her

skin. The Palmolive Company presents a product allegedly composed of the same elements that the ancient queen used to preserve and enhance her beauty. With a model such as her for reference, it is most likely that the company intended to inspire modern women and to get them to buy their product, with the hope they could reach her charm. There is the promise that the soap would “Wash away imperfections”, the additional effect of soaps, in addition to cleansing.

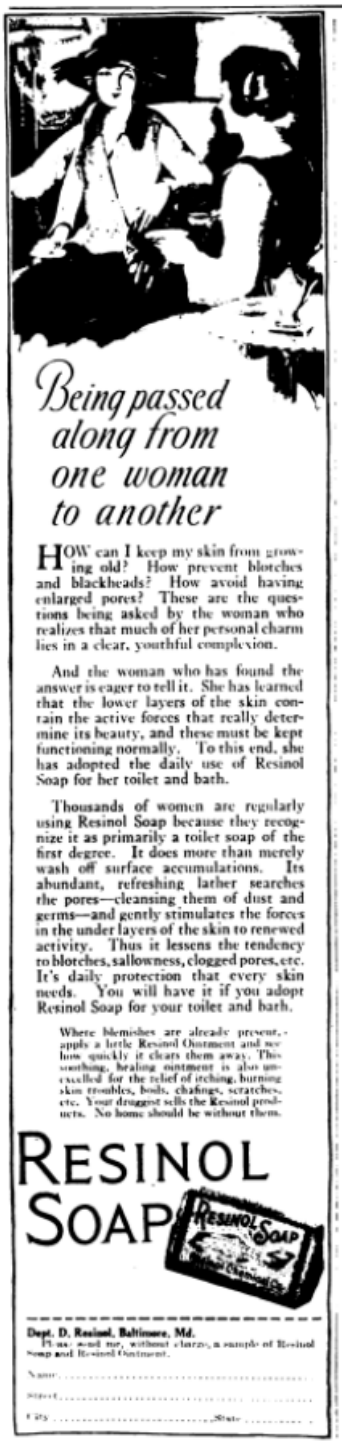
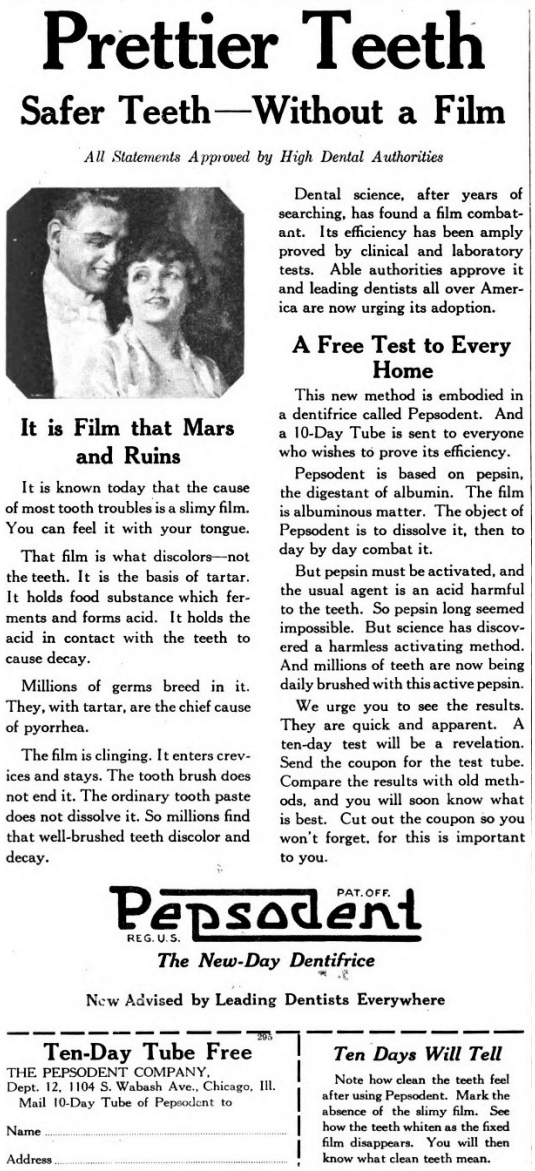


Figure 8 Resinol Soap, *The American Magazine*, Jan. 1925

In this advertisement for Resinol Soap [Fig. 8] what is more stressed on is the effect it can bring to the appearance of the skin. Several questions about how to remove the

flaws on the face are immediately posed, and the soap is presented as a sure solution to them. Here, the aid this product can give to bring out a woman's beauty is its primary strength. The advertisement presents a technical explanation of what is behind a woman's beauty, which gives the advertisement more credibility. The advertisement cites the positive results the soap can have with a more in-depth explanation, guiding the consumer through its specific actions and solutions. The advertisement states that the soap is already being used by thousands of women, and that it is their first choice of soap. Thus, this product is presented as already being approved by the customer's peers.



Prettier Teeth

Safer Teeth—Without a Film

All Statements Approved by High Dental Authorities

Dental science, after years of searching, has found a film combatant. Its efficiency has been amply proved by clinical and laboratory tests. Able authorities approve it and leading dentists all over America are now urging its adoption.

It is Film that Mars and Ruins

It is known today that the cause of most tooth troubles is a slimy film. You can feel it with your tongue.

That film is what discolors—not the teeth. It is the basis of tartar. It holds food substance which ferments and forms acid. It holds the acid in contact with the teeth to cause decay.

Millions of germs breed in it. They, with tartar, are the chief cause of pyorrhea.

The film is clinging. It enters crevices and stays. The tooth brush does not end it. The ordinary tooth paste does not dissolve it. So millions find that well-brushed teeth discolor and decay.

A Free Test to Every Home

This new method is embodied in a dentifrice called Pepsodent. And a 10-Day Tube is sent to everyone who wishes to prove its efficiency.

Pepsodent is based on pepsin, the digestant of albumin. The film is albuminous matter. The object of Pepsodent is to dissolve it, then to day by day combat it.

But pepsin must be activated, and the usual agent is an acid harmful to the teeth. So pepsin long seemed impossible. But science has discovered a harmless activating method. And millions of teeth are now being daily brushed with this active pepsin.

We urge you to see the results. They are quick and apparent. A ten-day test will be a revelation. Send the coupon for the test tube. Compare the results with old methods, and you will soon know what is best. Cut out the coupon so you won't forget, for this is important to you.

PAT. OFF.
Pepsodent
REG. U. S.

The New-Day Dentifrice

Now Advised by Leading Dentists Everywhere

295

Ten-Day Tube Free

THE PEPSODENT COMPANY,
Dept. 12, 1104 S. Wabash Ave., Chicago, Ill.
Mail 10-Day Tube of Pepsodent to

Name .....

Address .....

Ten Days Will Tell

Note how clean the teeth feel after using Pepsodent. Mark the absence of the slimy film. See how the teeth whiten as the fixed film disappears. You will then know what clean teeth mean.

Figure 9 Pepsodent, *The American Magazine*, Feb. 1920

This advertisement for Pepsodent toothpaste [Fig. 9] implies that it is not enough to simply brush your teeth in order to prevent or get rid of diseases and their consequences. What is needed is something different, a product of science capable of countering issues that rot and discolor teeth. This is how it is described the Pepsodent toothpaste, which supposedly differentiates from other products of this kind for its ability to protect teeth and the oral hygiene of a person in a much more effective way. This advertisement tempts the customer even more with a free test, so that they could decide

for themselves if the product is efficient. It is mentioned more than once that this toothpaste is the result of scientific testing, which discovered something that for a long time had been impossible, and it is described in detail itself. All of this gives a uniqueness to the product that distinguishes it from opponents.

Figure 10 Pebeco Toothpaste, *The Saturday Evening Post*, Mar. 1920

In this advertisement for the Pebeco Toothpaste [Fig. 10], it is advertised to a specific demographic, the male smokers, claiming that they find comfort in the taste of this toothpaste, which brings relief to the mouth. It is also promoted its action in cleaning the teeth, and as a combatant against "Acid-Mouth", when the pH of the mouth is under 7, which can cause different health problems as well as damage the teeth. In this case too it is offered a free trial, along with a free test to verify the mouth acidity. With its different

demographic and specific purpose, it could counter its opponents and carve a space in the market for itself.

Conclusion

With this thesis, I wanted to explore beauty in the consumerist society, with a focus on advertisements of the 1920s in America. There are several aspects to it, starting from the origins of commodity culture, how it permeated society and how it influenced the lives of the people, definitely changing the way of living and people's approaches to problems and their relationships with commodities. I then shifted the focus to the part women played in this new society and culture, to their role as the primary consumers and the responsibility they had of the house, the family and the money, as well as the view of consumption as a female activity. After that, I went into more depth into beauty culture itself, its relationship with race and social status, and its most important aspects: skin, hair, and hygiene.

The introduction of consumerism in the society, starting in England and soon developing to the rest of the world, brought dramatic and permanent changes. The way people saw objects and their relationship with the act of shopping transformed, it being now an act of leisure rather than a necessity. Women had a unique role in this. They were the ones that were the most involved with the consumer act, that being their assigned business. It was a time in which domesticity was the focus and the primary objective of women, made even more important by the quantity of women that started to work outside of the house. The ideal woman was supposed to take care of the house and the family, and use her husband's money to do so. However, this was only possible for middle-class, white women. Working-class and non-white women could not afford to be confined inside the house. Black women were held back by the racial discrimination, and were forced to find a job outside, as one wage was not enough to support the family. Usually, they worked as domestic help for white families. So, while the first were pressured to stay in the house, as the epitome of womanhood, the latter were forced to work outside to support the family.

Consumerism did not spare beauty culture, which gained even more importance in this time. More and more beauty products were advertised, urging American women to buy them if they wanted to make their natural beauty apparent. This is something that involved all women, although the general appreciation favored one more than the other. The standards of beauty were strict, and were inevitably in favor of the white woman: lighter skin and straight here were considered the peak of beauty. Many products, such as skin bleach and hair straighteners, were sold to black women with the promise that they could get closer to these ideals. White women were not free from restrictions either, as they could not stray from the thin, well-dressed, well-groomed woman the society expected. It was exceptionally important in a time such as this, when a woman's beauty was a great portion of her value.

Many beauty advertisements focused specifically on skin, hair, and hygiene. They sold countless of creams that promised to make the skin look rejuvenated, to get rid of flaws, and to make it lighter; shampoos and hair products that restored color, that gave it volume; soap that took care of the skin and toothpastes that protected teeth and gums.

In conclusion, we have seen how consumerism has seeped into society and how it shaped and changed the way of living and the relationship people have with products, as well as the world of beauty. It helped spread beauty products, with their now countless advertisements, full of reasons why women should buy and use their products. It can be said, then, that consumerism has helped somewhat the propagation of beauty culture and of its ideals, that in the 1920s were stronger than ever. The culture of beauty, and advertisements in general, embodied the beliefs of a certain time, and tried to steer people and society to conform. We see in beauty culture the insistence on controlling women's body, the rampant racial discrimination, and the persistence of traditional gender roles. It was a suffocating imposition, difficult to combat as it was deeply ingrained in society, and that marginalized anyone that did not perfectly fit.

With time, however, beauty culture started to get more diversified. The sentiment of body positivity started to grow, and more and more movements were an indicator of

this, such as the “fat acceptance movement” or the “Black is Beautiful movement”, both born in the 1960s. Today, we can see beauty and non-beauty advertisements much more diversified, with men and women of various skin tones and sizes. Of course, advertisements’ first priority is always profit, and they try to create more and more desires they can fulfill and problems they can solve, but the diversity now present in them reflects society’s more open acceptance, still flawed, but much less rigid than before.

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List of Illustrations

Summary in Italian

In questa tesi viene analizzato il fenomeno del consumismo in America, in particolare negli anni ’20, e di come esso abbia influenzato la società e le persone, cambiando il loro rapporto con gli oggetti e con l’atto dell’acquisto. La figura della donna è presa in considerazione in modo particolare, visto il suo ruolo prominente in questa nuova società. Viene poi approfondita la cultura della bellezza, sempre più importante a quei tempi, e la pubblicità che la rafforzava. Prima dell’avvento del consumismo, le persone non compravano a meno che non ne avessero stretta necessità. Non c’era il concetto di lussi, se non per coloro che vivevano nell’agio. Il consumismo, le cui cause sono diverse, permise per la prima volta anche alla popolazione meno abbiente di permettersi oggetti non essenziali. Le reazioni a ciò furono molteplici e contrastanti, ma i risultati di tale cambiamento furono innegabili. Per esempio, il numero e la varietà della merce aumentarono, così come la pubblicità che la presentava al pubblico, spingendolo a comprare sempre di più. Si iniziarono ad associare dei significati aggiuntivi agli oggetti, che iniziarono ad occupare un posto sempre più centrale nella vita delle persone. Fu un cambiamento fondamentale nel ruolo delle donne nella società. Esse erano infatti i consumatori principali, coloro che erano incaricate di comprare i beni che potevano servire alla casa e alla famiglia, di cui dovevano prendersi cura. Il ruolo della donna in quegli anni stava iniziando a diventare ambiguo: sempre più donne iniziarono a lavorare fuori dalla casa, ed emersero figure come la *New Woman*, altamente disprezzate da chi aveva a cuore le tradizioni e gli ideali rispettati fino ad allora. La donna ideale era colei che si prendeva cura della famiglia e che lavorava in casa. Perciò la pubblicità era indirizzata a lei. Queste stesse pubblicità rappresentavano le donne nella loro funzione in casa, ed insistevano nei ruoli di genere tradizionali. Bisogna però prendere in considerazione che non a tutte le donne erano riservate le stesse aspettative. Le donne nere, e le donne di famiglie meno abbienti, avevano sempre lavorato fuori casa, non essendo possibile per loro dipendere da un solo stipendio. Questo fu un periodo in cui la cultura della bellezza e l’aspetto esteriore della donna acquistava sempre più importanza. Innumerevoli pubblicità erano concentrate sui prodotti di bellezza, sottolineandone gli

effetti e l'importanza. Vi erano degli standard di bellezza rigidi, che la donna doveva seguire se voleva essere considerata attraente. Tali standard si conformavano all'ideale eurocentrico. La questione della razza è rilevante ancora una volta, in quando le donne nere erano alquanto lontane da tale ideale, il che le portava a non essere apprezzate nemmeno su questo piano. Nonostante ciò, ci si aspettava anche da parte loro uno sforzo nel seguire tali regole. Principalmente, una pelle chiara, capelli lisci, ed un fisico snello. Molti prodotti erano venduti per raggiungere quest'obiettivo, tanto alle donne nere quanto alle donne bianche. La cultura della bellezza si intersecava anche con lo stato sociale. Riuscendo a conformarsi agli standard, si aprivano molte porte e si poteva accedere più facilmente alla vita che era propria di quella che era considerata una donna di successo: un marito, figli, e una bella casa. La bellezza era gran parte del valore di una donna e, considerati i prodotti a disposizione per fare in modo di farla risaltare, era ormai data per scontata. Una donna non attraente era una donna che aveva fallito. Infine, in questa tesi vengono analizzate diverse pubblicità di magazine degli anni '20. Mi concentro in particolare su quelle che presentano prodotti di bellezza dedicati alla pelle, ai capelli, e all'igiene.