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Problematizing Handbags

by

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A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

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Edmonton, Alberta
Fall 2005

Abstract

For as long as people have had personal objects to be carried, handbags have been part of life. This analysis problematizes handbags, and identifies patterns and trends in Western history with respect to identity, class, and gender issues, which are interwoven with performativity, self-representation, mobility, aesthetics, autonomy, and vulnerability. These issues parallel, intercept, and merge with the changing social roles of women. Above all, the handbag is an enduring symbol of femininity in Western cultures. Whether seen as fetish or function by the women, men, and cross-dressers who carry them, the contrasts and similarities between the public exterior of handbags and the intensely private interior creates an interesting dynamic. Following Judith Butler, everyone performs in "necessary drag," since we must choose some method of presenting ourselves to the public. Vignettes appear throughout the text highlighting various handbag moments, and are works of fiction invented out of historical and contemporary circumstances.

Table of Contents

Introduction 1

I. Susanna(h) 8

Chapter 1: Theory and Methodology 17

Chapter 2: Why Handbags? 50

I. Survivalist, Archivist, Homemaker 65

Chapter 3: Class, Gender, and the Handbag as a Social Marker 72

I. The Handbag and the History of Fashion 73

i. *Fashion, Handbags, and Femininity from the Mid-Nineteenth Century to the Mid-Twentieth Century* 79

II. The Emergence of Haute Couture 85

Chapter 4: Performing Identity, Crossing the Border, and the Private Universe of the Purse 100

I. Erving Goffman and the Self as a Social Product 101

II. Necessary Drag 115

III. It's in the Bag: Intrigue, Mystery, and Possible Danger 124

Conclusion: 132

Bibliography 140

Appendices 147

Images

1. Van Gogh Boots 147
2. Mamie Eisenhower 1953 148
3. Grace Kelly 1956 149
4. Hermes "Trim" Handbag 1960s 150
5. Martha Stewart, Hermes Birkin 2004 151
6. Almoner (14th century, French) 152
7. Reticule (Early 19th Century) 153

Problematizing Handbags

The need for carrying about a number of small articles is one of the graver disadvantages of civilisation, and it is time that the problem of how this need can be met should be seriously tackled (Flugel, 1966: 187).

...it is not the object but the name that creates desire; it is not the dream but the meaning that sells (Barthes, 1985: xii).

We're born naked and the rest is drag – RuPaul (Lloyd, 1999: 195)

Introduction

Handbags are sociologically, historically, and philosophically significant objects with regard to Western culture, identity, and femininity. Handbags might be read as sites of conformity with socially constructed life scripts, or as sites of challenge to social expectations. The handbag can be seen as a fashion statement, a status symbol, a sign of independence, a sign of servitude, a portable home for the necessities of daily life, an intimate extension of the body, an archive for future generations, and a source of panic and violation when lost or stolen. The handbag can be used as a weapon or used to conceal weaponry such as hatpins, handguns, knives, or mace. The handbag is linked to the history of European expansion, the history of Enlightenment ideals, and the accompanying discourses and power relations. Whether treated as purely functional or as a fetish, the handbag is both public and private, and it exists as both border and link between the public and the private. Above all, the handbag is a symbol of changing social roles, and it is an enduring emblem of femininity in Western culture.

The handbag is an ordinary, everyday object in the Western world. So ordinary, in fact, that it becomes almost invisible. On the other hand, the handbag is a highly significant object capable of making bold statements about its owner. It is precisely the meaning of the near-invisibility/high-visibility of this ordinary/important material object

that attracts my attention and forms the basis of this investigation. Furthermore, whether nearly invisible or very visible and significant to the outside world, a woman's handbag and its contents are often some of her most important possessions for navigating the public realm. The division between a respectable, fashionable exterior and a profoundly private interior gives the handbag an erotic, transgressive charge. Jung believed the handbag, or pouch, to be the archetypal symbol for the hidden, secret womb, and Freud's vagina dentata expresses male fear of the possibly castrating qualities lurking within the dark, mysterious, and perhaps dangerous interior of the bag.

Many women claim that their handbag is their most essential and cherished accessory, mostly because the bag is the one item absolutely necessary for functioning properly in the public realm. This most quintessential feminine object is not only loved and indispensable for some women, but also symbolic. And the age-old love affair between women and their handbags is becoming hotter and heavier. Handbags dominate the accessories market, "accounting for $4.94 billion in sales in 1999, eclipsed only by jewelry" (Hagerty, 2002: 13). Fashion writers refer to women as more "obsessed" than ever by the latest handbag styles, and this obsession is worth paying top dollar for. Media reports claim that knock-offs account for millions of dollars of black market business.

Regardless of cost, women in the Western world carry classic handbags and trendy handbags. They carry enormous bags designed for work, shopping, or travel, and sexy little bags for evening. Whether referred to as handbags, bags, purses, totes, satchels, or pocketbooks, why do women commonly engage in the risky and very public business of carrying profoundly personal items in handbags? What do these bags mean to their owners and to onlookers, and what do these meanings have to do with social roles,

identity, and self-presentation? Does an expensive, designer handbag "say" something different than an inexpensive, ordinary bag? Is the handbag a symbol of feminine purity and servitude extending from biological determinism? Is it an emblem of independence, power, and status? Is it mysterious, dangerous, erotic? What interpretations can be made about women who do not carry handbags? Or men who do?

This thesis explores possible ways of answering these questions by examining new ways of understanding handbags. It focuses on the multiplicity of meanings that surround the handbag, an everyday object filled with clues about how we construct our lives and what they mean to us. More specifically, this analysis of handbags, and the contents of handbags, identifies patterns and trends in Western history, not only with respect to fashion, but more importantly with respect to identity, class, gender and border issues. Aspects concerning mobility, performativity, aesthetics, ephemerality, self-representation, autonomy, and vulnerability are interwoven throughout this project. I explore and question why the handbag is simply a functional, everyday object for some women, and an object of dreams and desires for others. Most importantly, whether fetish or functional, the contrasts and similarities between a public exterior and an intensely private interior creates an unmistakable and fascinating dynamic worthy of scholarly attention. These situations and concepts alternately parallel, intercept, and merge with the changing social roles of women throughout Western history.

Contrary to those who consider handbags and the fashion arena in general to be ontologically and conceptually unproblematic and superficial, I argue that handbags deserve investigation of a new sort. In contrast to the plethora of journalistic accounts found mostly in fashion magazines and newspapers, and documentation regarding the

history of handbags, I attempt to increase sociological understanding of the social and symbolic function of handbags in everyday life. Since academia generally considers matters involving handbags to be frivolous, and therefore academically inferior, important concepts and frameworks, and the spaces and connections between them, remain largely ignored and unexplained. The underlying currents and dynamics offered through interpretation of the multiplicity of meanings around handbags are almost non-existent. Addressing this academic silence, I offer an interpretation of defining historical moments concerning the handbag phenomenon, and the related transformations of meaning occurring over time. For as long as people have had personal objects to be carried, handbags have been part of life. Long ago, gold and silver coins facilitated the necessity for handbags beginning with drawstring pouches carried by both men and women. The handbag has evolved over time into various shapes, sizes, materials, and usage. It has been involved with many social aspects such as social roles and identity performance, as well as various other aspects concerning dress in the areas of religion, politics, media, and economics. Like tiny time capsules, handbags reveal useful insights into the lives of women across time, sometimes long after the women themselves are gone.

To explore the nature of the handbag, I focus on the ways handbags relate to the performance of identities conceived and nurtured within social roles that are continually subject to change, but most often subject to reproduction. Informed by ethnographic methods and with specific attention to historical and cultural conditions, I juxtapose these multiple sites of investigation, focusing on theoretical frameworks, social patterns, and the questions that motivate and drive my project. This is not a quantitative-based study,

nor is it an exhaustively documented account of "the truth." The focus is on dominant Western cultural styles instead of subcultural styles. By focusing on Western historical interpretation rather than detailed chronological history, I offer a comprehensive review of the handbag in order to contribute to knowledge regarding the key structures and patterns of sociological rhythms. Choosing this type of interpretation provides a more focused assessment of the origin and history of handbags, the economies and discourses of the handbag in Western cultural spaces, the distinct valuations associated with this particular ordinary, everyday object, and the women who become attached to them. I wish to problematize handbags, and point out new ways of understanding the various meanings associated with them in terms of identity, theory, and culture. I seek to understand why some women become intensely focused on acquiring and displaying expensive designer handbags, perhaps spending thousands of dollars on just one bag, and other women simply could not care less about the exterior appearance of their handbags. Herein lies the distinction between the handbag as both fetish and function.

Using the organizing factors of the handbag as both fetish and function and as both public and private, my thesis proceeds as follows. Chapter One outlines theory and methodology, explaining that theorists involved in this thesis are Roland Barthes, Pierre Bourdieu, George Simmel, Jean Baudrillard, Erving Goffman, and Judith Butler. J.C. Flugel, Gilles Lipovetsky, and Dorinne Kondo engage in this discussion as well. Discourse ethnography is discussed in terms of methodology. Chapter Two addresses the reasons why handbags are sociologically significant objects in cultural spaces, leading to the production of this thesis featuring handbags and identity. The third chapter focuses on issues of class and gender, guided by Bourdieu's theorizing, and the handbag as a social

marker across time. Following Simmel and Baudrillard, I engage in a discussion regarding the history of fashion in order to position the origin and evolution of the handbag within historical context. Chapter Four examines handbags, identity performance, and self-presentation, highlighting the contrasts and similarities between haute couture and ordinary bags, with the assistance of Erving Goffman and Judith Butler. Butler's account of the stylized rituals and repetitions of everyday life and their involvement with gender identity are discussed, in addition to a discussion of cross-dressers and handbags. The chapter continues with familiar themes, such as class, gender, identity, and mobility, and delves into matters concerning the handbag and the meanings of its most common contents. Changing and contradicting social roles are highlighted, but the issues concerning handbags as borders between the public and the intensely private are focused on in this chapter, in addition to the ways in which the common contents of handbags represent borders as well. I conclude by pointing to Butler's concept of "necessary drag", and by suggesting that there are many different ways of analyzing these issues both practically and theoretically, and there is no "right" way of obtaining the "truth" in this case. A certain level of illumination and understanding is attainable, however, and I argue that there are at least three different ways of analyzing handbags. First, by using class and gender as an angle of vision; second, by focusing on issues pertaining to self-identity and self-presentation; and third, by paying attention to certain aspects of mobility, border crossings, and "my life is in my handbag" issues.

Vignettes appear at various points in time throughout my thesis. The vignettes are works of fiction that I have created in order to highlight various handbag moments occurring during the course of women's lives. The shorter vignettes simply appear at

random. Regarding the following vignette that I invented about the mostly fictional Susanna(h)s, I must acknowledge that I was inspired to write this story when I spent some time in the Tennessee State Library and Archives, located in Nashville, and by spending time at the Belmead Plantation, also located in Nashville. The women of this thoroughbred horse-breeding plantation during the Civil War era fascinated me; the activities of the men from this plantation have been well represented and documented in the state archives and also in local folklore. A woman and her sister lived with their parents at Belmead, and later with their husbands and children, and I have borrowed material from some of the stories that I was told about these women, mostly by knowledgeable staff historians employed at the Belmead and the amazingly helpful archive librarians. The mountain of correspondence authored by the sisters, their parents, and their husbands proved to be immensely helpful in providing insight into the lives of these people in the Civil War era, and ultimately in the characters I created based in these historical circumstances. A Belmead slave woman dictated two letters to her master, these letters are found in the state archives, and this story is mostly for her, Susanna. Her letters touched me, and I wanted to illustrate the way she was made to live her life. The two main characters are deliberately named Susanna(h) to blur the lines of class distinction. The slave woman Susanna is morally embraceable, while the wealthy Susannah is not. Literature influenced the creation of these characters and their contexts as well. In particular, the work of Ridley Wills, a descendent of the family originally from Belmead, and also the work of Adela Pinch, who writes about wealthy female shoplifters in nineteenth century England. I then wove my characters around identity, gender, race, class, borders, mobility, and handbags.

Susanna(h)

Belmount Plantation, Nashville, Tennessee, December 1864. Bullets flew past my head as I stood on the stone arm of the front porch, watching the battle of Nashville begin right before my very eyes. I could hear the dull thud of bullets hitting the massive stone pillars that stood directly in front of me, forever denting the majesty of our beautiful mansion. I knew that the Confederate General and his men who made our plantation their headquarters were out there on the front lawn launching a surprise attack against the two hundred or so Union soldiers threatening our lives and property. Lead by Confederate Officer Becker, our rebels killed nine Yankees and took 15 others hostage before running the rest into the Deer Park behind our mansion. There, the Union infantry had formed a line of stiff resistance behind the stone wall that ran along the creek, which forced our men to retreat back toward our house. Not knowing what else to do, I quickly fished one of my delicately embroidered handkerchiefs out of my handbag and stood on the verandah waving it to support and encourage our men, one or two of which were sweet on me. I had also taken hold of my handgun that was in my handbag as well, and held it in my other hand. As Becker rode his horse back to the house, he noticed me and urged me to go inside, but I refused to until he caught my handkerchief, and all of our boys had disappeared safely behind the house.

As the scene of the battle at Belmount moved three miles or so southeast, I went to find another lace-edged handkerchief to carry with me in my handbag. No honorable Southern woman would ever be caught without a handkerchief under any circumstances. Handkerchiefs were an absolutely necessary item to have readily available at all times; it was a matter of hygiene, etiquette, and honor. They were also useful for hiding one's

facial expression, if it was unfortunate or inappropriate for the social moment. Handkerchiefs were very handy for putting up between the face and the public gaze at any given moment. These and other rules governing the behavior of worthy Southern women were taught to me first by my mother, then by the teachers at the Nashville Female Academy and, most recently, by the well-educated instructors at Madame Masse's French School in Philadelphia, where I have just returned home from.

My education, as well as that of my sister Laura, had been interrupted by the cessation of classes at the Nashville Female Academy after the fall of Fort Donelson in the spring of 1863. With the war still raging in Middle Tennessee, my parents eventually decided that Laura would attend the St. Cecilia Academy right here in Nashville, but that I would attend Madame Masse's French School in Philadelphia, and my close friend Melanie would accompany me! I was so very relieved because I had been afraid that I would have to stay here and marry one of my many suitors.

Along with the Southern gentlemen who showed me special attention, I had a close call with a Yankee of all people. His name was John Black and he was a federal soldier in the Fifteenth Pennsylvania Volunteer Cavalry. He stayed with us at Belmount during the winter and spring of 1862-1863, along with another Yankee from a Kentucky regiment. These two Yanks were ordered to Belmount as safeguards of my father's property and persons. John Black became infatuated with me. I dare say that I was quite a hit with the soldiers, everyone said so. Although I made it perfectly clear to Black that I had no use for Yankees, he persisted. One evening when we were all seated at the dinner table in the dining room, along with my good friend Mary who was visiting, my mother mentioned that Black had participated in the Battle of Stones River. I simply said, "Why

mother dear, he does not look so very dangerous! But then of course no Yankees are!" Mary giggled behind her handkerchief while I remarked about the bravery of Union soldiers, until John Black playfully retorted, "There will be a time Miss Susannah, when you will marry a Yankee soldier." I was so infuriated that I stamped my foot angrily and hissed, "I would rather marry a dog than a Yankee!" Rather than argue with me, John Black excused himself from the table, bowed to the dinner party, and proceeded out to the verandah. Father immediately went after him and apologized for my breech of Southern hospitality. Father then returned to the dining room, where I sat innocently admiring our new crystal chandelier, met my eye, and spoke to me directly. A moment later, I was out on the verandah apologizing to Mr. Black. "My dear sir! Please accept my apology for those horrid words I spoke at the dinner table; I am very sorry!" Even though I am sure that he must have known the answer to his question, Mr. Black asked, "Miss Susannah, tell me truly, is your pretty apology all spontaneous and sincere?" The spitfire in me answered, "Not at all. I was compelled to make you an apology, for father said that if I did not apologize to you at once, he would see to it that my order from Paris would not find its way to Belmount!"

I wondered why these Yankees were protecting us anyway, when our Confederate armies were so valiantly fighting against them to protect our wonderful Southern way of life. But my father was a very rich and powerful man, so I imagined that he knew what he was doing, but it looked to me as though he was friendly with both sides of the North/South border, if you know what I mean. I especially wondered about this state of affairs since my father was in prison for most of 1862 after he was caught giving half of a million dollars to the Yankees, and arrested as a sympathizer. Even though he was a

powerful man and a Brigadier General in the Tennessee Militia, he was sent to Fort Mackinaw for refusing to take the oath after he was arrested. I find my father's actions quite confusing, especially since he eventually did take the oath. All I know is that we missed him terribly while he was away, and we corresponded frequently with him, my mother in particular. Being left in charge of running this large thoroughbred horse-breeding plantation, with all those unruly slaves and a war raging all around was too much for her to bear. Sadly, she died from exhaustion shortly after our Southern lifestyle was all but destroyed and the war ended. All too quickly, I required a ladies' mourning toilette, a walking skirt, basque, and lace headdress, when my mother passed away. While I was in mourning for my poor mother, I spent hours in the upstairs sitting room for the ladies of our house, stitching a black and violet colored handbag for myself, and trying not to notice the amount of time that Susanna spent with my grieving father. Aside from suffering the loss of his own dear and devoted wife, my father was also busy keeping those awful carpetbaggers away from our property. The freed slaves roamed around the countryside with those horrid carpetbags, squatting on honest peoples' land and causing trouble. Or worse, they would expect to be hired on as workers and paid wages! Outrageous! My father spent a lot of time sitting in his downstairs office, where he took care of the plantation business, and Susanna waited on him hand and foot.

Thank the Lord above for Susanna, our devoted slave and housekeeper. She took care of my father, Laura, and myself. In the mornings, after she served our breakfast trays in our bedrooms, Susanna helped Laura and I get dressed, tying the laces as tight as she could on our corsets. She spent the rest of the day at our beck and call. My father spent his days managing the plantation business, and overseeing the thoroughbreds and

the two hundred or so slaves who worked for us. Susanna took especially good care of my father. Perhaps a little too good. The letters that she wrote to my father while he was imprisoned sound a little too familiar. She seems to be overstepping her station, and taking advantage. I'll let you judge for yourself. Here are copies of the letters Susanna wrote to my father.

Unfortunately, due to that miserable old war, my fineries from Paris never did arrive at Belmount. I just don't know what happened to them. I was able, however, to buy fancy new gowns and walking costumes of the latest style when I was in Philadelphia, which is close enough to the New York fashion industry to carry Parisian imports. What a fine time we had when that nasty war ended and my father began restoring Belmount to its former glory. He was in a very good position when the war was over, since he had friends in high places among Union and Confederate officials alike. Luckily, about seventy slaves stayed with us on Belmount, so we had lots of help.

Ever since Elias Howe patented the sewing machine, our slaves have been sewing clothes here on our plantation. Mother, Laura, and me, Susannah, have our carriage driven into Nashville and have our dressmaker there sew our clothing. She was wonderfully able to determine how to cut and assemble a garment. Every one of our costumes was a hand sewn original, thanks to her. Father visited his tailor in Nashville, who sewed the finest suits for him.

Then, in 1863, Ebenezer Butterick, a tailor, and his wife, introduced the first paper patterns with graded sizes for boy's shirts, and women's and children's patterns were introduced in 1866. Although the Butterick's success was overwhelming – they sold over 6,000,000 patterns in 1871 alone – the paper patterns were of little consequence to

me, since I would not be caught dead in a costume that was not an original made especially for me. Besides, the Butterick's publication, Metropolitan Fashions, was directed toward the middle class woman with a family, and shows boring old everyday clothes. Everyday clothes were fine for them, but I was much more interested in the ladies' trained costume, and the ladies' pointed basque. I loved to see the new patterns and styles in fashion magazines.

When our lawyer read my mother's will, I was surprised to discover that, as her oldest daughter, she had left me my grandmother's pear shaped pocket. My grandmother wore this large, lovely pocket laced around her waist, hidden beneath her petticoats and hooped skirts. In it, I found my grandmother's knitting patterns, her favorite poems, prayer books, and ribbons. These items were so treasured by my grandmother that she bequeathed her pocket to her eldest daughter, my mother, in her will, and my mother bequeathed it to me upon her death. My mother added a few items by the look of things: letters.

Oh, I had the most divine ball gowns, walking costumes, shoes, hats, and those delightful new leather handbags coming from Paris. I ordered my clothes directly from Charles Worth in Paris, sight unseen! Handbags as a fashion accessory--what a simply divine idea! A lady of my social standing never uses her hands for anything more than waving a fan or powdering her nose, of course, not with all those servants around. Why, I swear, Susanna is my right hand. She does pretty near everything for me. That's why I was so thrilled to hear the news about those wonderful handbags that they're making over there in Europe. A real lady's hands are always free, that's what slaves are for, so what better way to ensure that one was always in possession of a handkerchief, a fan, a

powder puff, smelling salts, and calling cards. I sometimes even carried money when I was driven into town, even though I did all of my shopping on my father's and later my husband's credit. Of course, Susanna did all of that boring shopping for food and household necessities. I, however, browsed through the town shops whenever I pleased. My men were so rich; the shopkeepers did not even send them my bills for a year or so after my purchases! Even when I married my brave, handsome war hero, William, in 1868, and gave birth to my five children, my shopping expeditions did not change one bit! Well, perhaps my shopping habits changed just a tiny bit...

When I go into Nashville these days, the first place I stop is the MacIntyre Beauty Parlor on the corner of Sixth Avenue, North, and Union Street. The Stone sisters who own and operate the beauty parlor cater to women like me, white and wealthy, and are efficient with all of the latest hair techniques. The sisters, Lee, Sallie, and Annie, often travel to Frederick's in New York City, where they learn fashionable hair styles from Paris. In fact, the sisters introduced the very first permanent wave machine to the wealthy women of Nashville, which they learned to use in New York. I could buy hairpieces and wigs from France in their beauty parlor, and also hair-weaving equipment, hair dryers, and hair cutting tools. Susanna used these hair-cutting tools on the plantation workers. The sisters later developed "Stone-White", which was a skin bleaching lotion, and sold it in their beauty parlor. I imagine that they developed Stone-White because they wished to appear whiter skinned than they actually are, since their mother was born a slave. Their father was a wealthy white Jewish planter in Tennessee, but not all of the girls took after their father, if you know what I am referring to. Anyway, I loved to have my hair

shampooed and styled by the sisters. Having my hair done always puts me in the mood for shopping.

When I leave the McIntyre Beauty Parlor, I generally walk over to Fowler's General Store to pick up odds and ends and catch up on the latest gossip with the other ladies who are shopping there. From Fowler's store, I wander around town, chatting with people I am acquainted with and showing off my finest walking costume all the while. I love to save the best part for last. Shopping in McGavock's Fineries was such a delight, for the proprietor, Luke McGavock, kept his store fully stocked with the most beautiful fashion accessories that he obtained from New York City. I especially loved the handkerchiefs. In fact, I was obsessed with the handkerchiefs. I suppose one could say that handkerchiefs were my fetish. I am sure that others would say I was a shoplifter. I truly and dearly loved the gorgeous leather handbags that were hand crafted over there in Europe, and I always carried mine with me on shopping excursions in the city. Somehow, the most beautiful handkerchiefs in McGavock's would wind up tucked away in my handbag, and I would leave the store without asking Mr. McGavock to add it to my bill. This was my very favorite part of my shopping trips because it was the most exciting. Now, you might ask, why would a woman who can clearly afford to pay for handkerchiefs, even the finest, imported ones, want to hide them in a handbag and steal them? Quite simply, I had fallen under the spell of this everyday object.

Oh, the thrill of it all! If I were ever to be caught stealing handkerchiefs, if they were ever discovered hiding in my handbag, I would be disgraced. I would also bring disgrace to William, my children, and both of our honorable families if I were caught. I

would bring dishonor to my entire way of life and my own identity. What a gamble! What excitement!

One might wonder why I was willing to take this gamble, even if it was very exciting. I wondered about that very thing sometimes myself. I suppose that I just had this need, this compulsion, to thumb my nose at my inherited wealth and social position. William and I entertained the crème de la crème in our mansion, and associated with the very best families in our great nation and beyond. Why did I feel compelled to establish and reinforce the fraudulence of my good fortune?

Chapter One: Theory and Methodology

> *Asking a woman about her handbag is like giving her a Rorschach test. Like the ink blot, the bag's familiar pattern is a sort of screen onto which she can project her longings, beliefs, attentions, intentions, idiosyncrasies – and anxieties. For not all women look fondly on their handbags. Some women associate them with deprivation, insecurity, or unwanted responsibilities* (Hagerty, 2002: 13).

> *I'm so sick and tired of dragging this heavy purse around – it weighs a ton. And it's not even my stuff! My husband and kids make me carry their stuff too! Anytime anyone needs something, it's "Mom, can I have my Spiderman toy? Mom, can I have my Fruit Roll-up?" Or, "Honey, can you pass me my nail clippers?" And someone is always asking me for a Kleenex! I mean, I love my family, but why do I have to carry their junk around? My bag weighs a ton! What, do I have "packhorse" stamped on my forehead or something?*

Is this a case of "biological destiny?" I think not; however, Henrietta Timmons states on her webpage, in all of her wisdom: "My opinion is that the need to carry something to hold goods is a fundamental need rooted in the biology of females. Who is the main caregiver of the family from prehistory to present? Yes, I know that traditional roles are gradually evolving but what person in the 'traditional' family is the most responsible for taking care of everyone? In most cases, it is the woman who gets people organized and makes sure everyone has whatever they need. Biologically speaking, the female of our species takes care of her offspring and makes sure that all needs will be taken care of once the home is left. I believe that this has evolved into women carrying all that they need and what everyone else could possibly want in their handbag. To illustrate – when you go out with a male friend do you ask him for tissues, pen, or paper? No – you ask another female. Another nurturer is more likely to have some basic necessities than a male" (http://searchwarp.com/swa3023.htm).

I wish to clarify that my poststructuralist critique is launched against both biological reductionisms and essentialism. I do not mean to suggest that these are the

same; we can have essentialisms that are not reductions to the biological. It should also be noted that the following issues and situations that arise from problematizing handbags pertain specifically to the Western world. Anthropologists such as Jennifer Craik (1993) who study fashion in non-Western or traditional societies criticize the way fashion is often equated with Western dress, and I acknowledge that this type of consumer society is found in societies other than Western societies. Craik argues that discussing fashion only in terms of Western dress is "Eurocentric and fails to acknowledge the processes of change in dress practices throughout the world. However, even she admits that there is something unique about Western fashion in a consumer society in which a cycle of changing styles is deliberately fostered by the economic system" (Entwistle and Wilson, 2002: 2).

The term fashion itself, however, brings to mind "high velocity, rapid turnover, the illusion of total access and high convertibility, the assumption of a democracy of consumers and of objects of consumption" (Appadurai, 1986: 32). Partly, it is the uniqueness of this link between fashion, both haute couture and everyday wear, and the heavy influences of the Western economy that makes handbags and the performance of the Western identity sociologically, philosophically, and historically appealing.

Regarding handbag fetishism, the desire for image management prompted one author to exclaim, "Seven Hundred F***ing Dollars for a Louis Vuitton handbag?" He says, "...what are you buying for seven hundred dollars? It certainly isn't the leather, although I'm sure it's flawless. It really isn't the bag that people are shelling out the cash for. It is the lifestyle, the envy, the feeling of success and accomplishment. The name, the identity, the image of sitting in the middle of Ducasse sipping tea. Lounging by the pool

with Mommy and Philippe. Walking Muffy on Park Avenue. It is a Harry Winston necklace, Mikimoto pearls, and having the driver pull the car around. It is a presidential fundraising luncheon. It is *"everything"* all rolled into a seven hundred dollar bag" (Weinberger, http://www.underconsideration.com/speakup/archives/002166.html)

It is important to note, as Arjun Appadurai points out, "[m]odern consumers are the victims of the velocity of fashion as surely as primitive consumers are the victims of the stability of sumptuary law. The demand for commodities is critically regulated by this variety of taste-making mechanisms, whose social origin is more clearly understood (both by consumers and by analysts) in our own society than in those distant from us" (1986: 32). Furthermore, Appadurai elaborates on the subject of demand:

> ...the critical difference between modern, capitalist societies and those based on simpler forms of technology and labor is *not* that we have a thoroughly commoditized economy whereas theirs is one in which subsistence is dominant and commodity exchange has made only limited inroads, but rather that the consumption demands of persons in our own society are regulated by high-turnover criteria of "appropriateness" (fashion), in contrast to the less frequent shifts in more directly regulated sumptuary or customary systems. In both cases, however, demand is a socially regulated and generated impulse, not an artifact of individual whims or needs (1986: 32).

Appadurai suggests that demand is "the economic expression of the political logic of consumption," and, therefore, "consumption is eminently social, relational, and active rather than private, atomic, or passive" (1986: 31). Baudrillard (1981) "places the logic of consumption under the dominion of the social logics of both production and exchange, equally" while making "an immensely effective critique of Marx and his fellow political economists in regard to the twin concepts of "need" and "utility," both of which the latter saw as rooted in a primitive, universal, and natural substrate of basic human requirements" (Appadurai, 1986: 31). Baudrillard deconstructs utility and need, and

relocates them in the larger sphere of production and exchange, but Appadurai pushes Baudrillard's deconstruction and relocation one step further by extending this idea to non-capitalist societies as well as contemporary capitalist societies (Appadurai, 1986: 31). This view allows Appadurai to make an important point regarding the implications for demand and consumption. He states, "[i]t means looking at consumption (and the demand that makes it possible) as a focus not only for *sending* social messages...but for *receiving* them as well" (1986: 31).

Appadurai's extension of Baudrillard's notions can easily be applied to the situation at hand regarding women, handbags, and identity performance. The handbag as a material cultural object must be viewed by understanding others in order for its existence to create the full impact. There is little point to spending hundreds or thousands of dollars on a designer handbag if no one is able to receive and comprehend the message. A woman who carries an outrageously expensive designer handbag sends social messages by carrying the bag in public (versus carrying the bag around the house in private). The bag is on display for an audience able to receive the messages. Therefore, I extend this concept even further by suggesting that, in addition to sending and receiving messages, the actors involved must also be capable of *comprehending* the messages. Again, there is no point to carrying an expensive handbag if the audience does not understand its significance.

Analyzing women's handbags within a Western context is not to disregard similar patterns and processes occurring in other places, and the consequences thereof, but to acknowledge such ever-changing and often manufactured Western issues as taste, desire, demand, interchangeability, and access of the handbag as a commodity. Most

importantly, my aim is to analyze and problematize the various meanings of handbags in the Western sense, and the resulting discourses.

Moving beyond the boundaries of traditional ethnographic research methods defined by the study of people and/or objects in their natural setting, I am constructing a new framework out of pre-existing methods and theories with which handbags can be interpreted. I am using these methods to discover and analyze the multiplicity of meanings associated with the handbag, as well as using the handbag itself to uncover and inspect what occurs theoretically. I use the handbag as an investigative tool for analyzing the processes and discourses surrounding particular performances of individual and group identities within a regime of commodity capitalism.

Perhaps this type of methodology might be termed "discourse ethnography," a useful method for examining the discourses of performing identities in the ordinary setting of everyday life at multiple levels of meaning. Discourse ethnography, as I use it here, claims a site between discourse analysis and anthropological ethnography. I mean it to refer to a poststructuralist way of performing an ethnography of discourses. I include textual analysis in this description as well.

This is how I see it. Discourse analysis and textual analysis allow for comprehensive and cohesive explanation of information collected from an in-depth literature review and informal observation and conversation. Investigating handbags and identity performance yields rich, previously undocumented information by accessing the specificity of individual experiences as well as the experiences of certain social groups. As Gillian Rose explains, the interpretation of data includes "finding 'significant clusters' of meaning and then 'charting' the lines that join these clusters with the social and

discursive positioning of readers" (2001: 196). This allows patterns of argument and evidence to emerge, which in turn allow underlying ideologies to be established. Discourse "refers to groups of statements which structure the way a thing is thought, and the way we act on the basis of that thinking" (Rose, 2001: 136). In my thesis, discourse refers to groups of statements which structure the way the handbag is thought of, and explores the way we act on the basis of that thinking. Discourse analysis takes the text as a vein of larger discourses, and the various ways through which a discourse can be thought of and articulated means that intertextuality becomes important for understanding the discourse. More specifically, discourse analysis sees discourse as a mode of (re)creating the world both at material and subject positions. The discourses around handbags and identity performance involve different types of power and power relations. Discourse is a form of discipline and it is powerful because it is productive. As Rose states, human subjects are produced through discourses. Our sense of self is made through the operation of discourse. So too are objects, relations, places, and scenes: discourse produces the world as it understands it (2001: 137). Discourse analysis allows for exploration of the production of ideas as well as objects in the material world; therefore, discourse analysis further assists the reading of the handbag as a text rich with information regarding social roles and identity.

Textual analysis understands the text as primary, the handbag in this case, and allows for further interpretation. Textual analysis also allows exploration of how the text signifies through symbols and language, and how meaning is reproduced outside of the text. Semiology deals effectively with sign systems, both linguistic and non-linguistic. In *The Fashion System* (1985), Roland Barthes attempts to understand the written discourse

within fashion magazines, as opposed to the visual discourse. He states that he chose fashion magazines for his study because of their "methodological purity" that makes them so accessible to analyze as opposed to the heterogeneity of everyday dress practices. In his opinion, everyday dress is far more complex and messy than the fashion discourse found within the magazines. My thesis addresses this messiness by taking into account the complex social dimensions of handbags as material objects found in everyday life using existing methods and theories, but taking them in new directions.

Barthes (1985) addresses the translation of clothing into language and language into clothing. In doing so, he effectively escapes linguistics, the science of verbal signs, and semiology, the science of object signs (1985: x). Adopting a Saussurean postulate, Barthes insists that human language is not only the model of meaning, but also its very foundation. For him, as soon as fashion is observed, it must be written about because without discourse there is no fashion. Talking or writing about fashion comes before the reality of clothing. In this way, discourse comes before the object signs; linguistics comes before semiology. Suspicious that the presence of human speech is not entirely an innocent occurrence in fashion, Barthes asks why fashion interposes a network of meaning comprised of words and images between the object and its user (1985: xi). His answer is economics. He states: "Calculating industrial society is obliged to form consumers who don't calculate; if clothing's producers and consumers had the same consciousness, clothing would be bought (and produced) only at the very slow rate of its dilapidation. Fashion, like all fashions, depends on a disparity of two consciousnesses, each foreign to the other. In order to blunt the buyer's calculating consciousness, a veil must be drawn around the object – a veil of images, of reasons, of meanings (1985: xi).

Barthes asserts that the commercial origin of our society's image system is desire, and I agree with him on this. He believes, "what is remarkable about this image system constituted with desire as its goal...is that its substance is essentially *intelligible*: it is not the object but the name that creates desire; it is not the dream but the meaning that sells" (1985: xii). The desires and meanings that Barthes refers to can be identified in the case of handbags, particularly designer bags.

Textual analysis is useful for analyzing the text as well as the language and the imagery; discourse analysis allows for exploration of the discourses that surround representation and the material world. Although the handbag as a signifier remains relatively stable over time, what the signifier signifies changes. Further complicating the matter is the notion put forth by French poststructuralists that the signifier does not only mean one certain signified object – it is different for everyone. Regarding the rhetorical transformation of the fashion sign, Barthes states: "[t]he sign is the union of the signifier and the signified, of clothing and the world, of clothing and Fashion" (1985: 263). Barthes observes that fashion magazines do not always present this sign in a direct manner; they do not necessarily declare, "[t]he accessory is the signifier of the signified spring. This year, short dresses are the sign of Fashion" (Barthes, 1985: 263). Instead, the fashion magazines say, in a completely different manner, "[t]he accessory makes the spring. This year, dresses are worn short; by its rhetoric, the magazine can transform the relation between signifier and signified and substitute for pure equivalence the allusion of other relations (transitivity, finality, attribution, causality, etc.)" (Barthes, 1985: 263). With regard to signs and functions in real clothing, Barthes writes:

> We might be tempted to set purely functional clothing (blue jeans) in opposition to purely signaletic Fashion clothing, even when its signs are hidden behind

> functions (*a black dress for cocktails*). This would be an inexact opposition: however functional it may be, real clothing always includes a descriptive element, insofar as every function is at least a sign of itself; blue jeans are useful for working, but they also 'say' work, a raincoat protects from the rain, but it signifies rain as well (1985: 264).

Barthes explains that the Woman of Fashion reflects "the permanent compromise which marks the relation between mass culture and its consumers: the Woman of Fashion is simultaneously what the reader is and what she dreams of being; her psychological profile is nearly that of all the stars 'told' about every day by mass culture, so true is it that Fashion, by its rhetorical signified, participants profoundly in this culture" (1985: 261). In this way, for Barthes, women "learn" about the latest fashions via mass culture, particularly media culture, which creates the desire to obtain fashionable clothing items and accessories, such as handbags, in order to create and live the image of a Woman of Fashion. If Barthes is correct in saying that women "learn" about the latest material objects of desire from media, then the influential role of fashion magazines must be acknowledged. Handbags in particular are regularly featured in fashion magazines (*Vogue*, January 2004; *Harpers Bazar*, June 2004: 96-99; *In Style*, October 2004: 280-298). Some women will go to great lengths to satisfy the desire for items that are in vogue, often paying outrageous prices for designer handbags, such as the famous Hermes Birkin and Kelly bags. Other women are completely uninterested in expensive designer handbags, and carry bags designed for functionality. Aside from involving issues of the handbag as a fetish or as simply functional, this is also a class issue.

Rounding out the method of discourse ethnography is ethnography itself, a probing exploration of real people and the material objects in their lives that matter. However, I do not mean to refer to traditional, holistic evaluations of people and societies

involving structured ethnographic fieldwork. Rather than understanding "the field" as a faraway place where "primitive peoples" are observed and then reported upon, I see my everyday surroundings as "the field." Aside from continually observing and analyzing men and women and handbags in Edmonton, Alberta, I have informally observed the handbag phenomenon in numerous metropolitan sites across North America during the production of this thesis. I have traveled to Toronto, Montreal, Quebec City, Halifax, and Moncton within Canada, and to Bar Harbor, Nashville, Spokane, Seattle, Portland, San Francisco, Los Angeles, and twice to both Vancouver and Las Vegas over the past two years, closely observing handbags and the people around them within urban spaces such as airports, hotels, restaurants, night clubs, casinos, shopping malls, and designer boutiques. The sales staff in shops such as Prada, Gucci, Hermes, Louis Vuitton, Chanel, and Christian Dior located in Los Angeles and Las Vegas willingly engaged in discussion regarding handbags and the people who purchase them. I began to understand handbags in terms of fetish and function, but also in terms of class, gender, and mobility.

Most women speak freely about their handbags and what they mean to them, including the contents, but others will not discuss anything beyond the usual items found in almost all handbags. Any woman who has lost a handbag, or had it stolen, is more than willing to relate every detail of the loss or theft. Countless women related stories of what happened when their bag was lost or stolen, and how they felt about the experience. I encountered one woman in the stands at a minor hockey game who just discovered that her handbag was missing, and I watched the entire traumatic event unfold before me. I suspected that men who lose their wallet have similar reactions, and this suspicion was confirmed for me firsthand when my teenaged son's wallet went missing. Personally, I

have had a handbag stolen, and I have misplaced handbags on several occasions. I inadvertently left my bag behind once at a hockey arena, once in a grocery cart, once in a washroom in the Henry Marshall Tory Building on the University of Alberta campus, twice in classrooms in the same building, and most recently in the Sociology graduate students computer lab. My handbag has been returned to me intact on all of the occasions when I left it behind, but not until hours later, providing plenty of time for panic to set in. However, when my bag was stolen, I received nothing back but the bag itself, completely empty. And it was not even an expensive designer bag, just a regular ordinary one that did not hold anything special for me, except, that is, the contents that it used to contain. Needless to say, I have cancelled my credit cards and debit cards on more than one occasion. These experiences allow me to relate to other women's stories and experiences. In addition to handbags, I have carried a briefcase around the business world, and toted diaper bags of every size and description, and sported a backpack when studying on campus and while travelling. I have also spent many years not carrying a handbag or any sort of bag at all. Attempting to cram the necessities of the day into any available pockets has its advantages and disadvantages, and I can certainly identify with J.C. Flugel's bewilderment on this issue.

Handbags are sometimes featured in popular culture and literature. Issues of power, gender, and identity associated with bags appear from time to time in academic discourses such as history, philosophy, and art. Matters of clothing and accessories other than haute couture appear in philosophical literature on occasion. For example, Martin Heidegger ignited a long-running debate among Continental philosophers over a pair of boots depicted by Van Gogh as represented in Image 1 on page 148

(http:www/mystudios.com/art/post/van-gogh/van-gogh-boots.html). Jacques Derrida challenged Heidegger's claim that the boots shown in the painting were owned by a peasant, or perhaps by Van Gogh himself. The question of ownership in Derrida's view is largely irrelevant to Heidegger's aesthetic argument or to what is going on in painting generally and how, if at all, it registers some type of truth (Derrida, 1987). The treatment of representation in this philosophical exchange over an everyday object is significant, as is the importance of aesthetics with regard to handbags. I discovered that, once I began to really notice bags and their owners, many sociologically interesting issues and phenomenon came to light. Handbags are everywhere in "the field," but no one has really analyzed them in a sociological sense.

As the most coveted accessory, the handbag has the potential for great insight into the owner's psyche, since most women carry their world around with them. Nathalie Lecroc, a Parisian artist, paints watercolors of women's handbags and their contents. She says that it is incredible what she can say about the bag's owner after spending two or three hours with their bags. She describes her service as a "narcissistic reflection" in a tradition that dates back to the seventeenth century, when landowners commissioned artists to paint their estates. Never before have handbags been so important, according to Lecroc, they are the most sought-after accessories generating millions of dollars for the companies that manufacture them. She has painted approximately 139 handbag watercolors so far, and when she paints 1,001 watercolors, she will publish them together in a volume entitled, *A Short Anthology of Bags and Handbags.* Lecroc is doing more important work than she might realize, since in the years to come, her paintings will have

the potential to inform historians with almost everything they will need to know about women in this era (http://flatrock.org).

To proceed, and in contrast to methods attempting to find "the truth" through natural, predetermined biological processes, I engage poststructuralist and deconstructive approaches that subvert essentialist notions of identity construction and presentation in addressing issues and discourses of handbags, identity, and performance. Laurel Richardson (2000) calls for understanding and recognition of writing as a method of inquiry, where the process of writing itself becomes investigative and produces knowledge. Dorinne Kondo considers "the field" to be our everyday lives, and advocates "a move to performative ethnography, in which performance is accorded status as ethnographic practice, and in which ethnographies, through performance conventionally defined and through performative writing strategies, can count as theory and as political" (1997: 20). Drawing similarities between theatrical performance and fashion, Kondo writes:

> ...in its ceaseless changes, fashion resists any attempt at totalization or at fixing an analytic object. By the time these words appear in published form, some features of fashion will already be out of date, and the object of investigation will have shifted.... In short, both theater and fashion occasion reflection on the totalizing gesture implicit in all attempts at writing about performance, including ethnographic ones, and on the academic privilege accorded the textual object. Similarly, theater and fashion disrupt the notion of fieldwork as a continuous sojourn in a single locale. Instead, both require intensive, short-term investigations, sometimes in widely scattered parts of the globe (1997: 20).

One could imagine applying the same principles in one locale as well.

The research contained in my thesis was gathered via an extensive literature review and informal observation and conversation conducted in "the field." I include vignettes in my writing as a way of disrupting the illusion of attaining truth by rigidly

defined and structured methods of research, and as a way of highlighting the multiple forces involved in forming the subject, including class, gender, and sexuality, that are sometimes contested and always changing. Rather than fixed, biological predetermination or essentializing discourses, it is the formation and presentation of the self, the performance of identity and the understanding gaze of onlookers, that brings these identities into existence. A poststructuralist theoretical frame allows for the freedom to release identities from these so-called natural, essentialist determinations, problematize them, and, in the process, make them much more difficult to dismiss as frivolous, feminine, and therefore unimportant. Completing the discourse ethnography approach and the above-mentioned theorists, I explore Georg Simmel's work on fashion. I also examine Erving Goffman and Judith Butler on performativity, and the self as a social product.

Thorstein Veblen, J. C. Flugel, and Georg Simmel, among others, wrote about fashion, criticizing and rejecting fashionable dress as a trivial, wasteful form of conspicuous consumption. Simmel's fashion theory, however, is arguably the most prominent theory of fashion and clothing behavior. Gilles Lipovetsky draws from Simmel as well as Jean Baudrillard as he explores the history of fashion. But many other theorists draw from Simmel in importantly different ways. I explore Simmel's fashion theory further to what Lipovetsky does with it, and discuss later social and theoretical developments, before moving into class, gender, and mobility issues around handbags, identity, and identity performance. Let us begin with Simmel.

For Simmel, fashion is a form of imitation and social equalization, but also, because it changes incessantly, it differentiates one social class from other social classes.

Simmel proposes that fashion changes occur as a result of a process of imitation of social elites by their social inferiors (Simmel, 1957). Writing in the middle of the twentieth century when social classes were represented by fairly distinct class cultures, Simmel believed that the upper classes introduced new fashions, which were later adopted by the middle and lower classes, partly to even out the external distinctions of class. When others imitated their fashions, the elite created new fashions in an effort to maintain their uniqueness by visually segregating themselves from everyone else. Imitation, for Simmel, concerns externals and superficialities where irrationality does no harm (1957: 541). Irrationality for Simmel is symptomatic of middle class women. He writes that imitation "signalizes the lack of personal freedom; hence it characterizes the female and the middle class, whose increased social freedom is matched by intense individual subjugation" (1957: 541).

Through imitation, the individual becomes identifiable as part of a group. By imitating, the individual rejects creative activity and transfers the responsibility for the action from themselves to others. The individual is released from the responsibility of choosing because they are simply just part of a group that chooses on their behalf. The imitator is passive, is reassured by social similarity, and easily adapts to existing elements, whereas the teleological individual is continually experimenting while relying on personal convictions (Simmel, 1957: 543).

Fashion is a product of class distinction, says Simmel, and has the dual function of revolving within a given circle while at the same time emphasizing it as separate from others (1957: 544). Within these dual functions of union and segregation, without which fashion could not exist, Simmel proposes that fashion is merely a product of social

demands. Simmel believes that this is so, even though the individual object which fashion creates or recreates may represent a more or less individual need (1957: 544). There is usually no good reason for fashion creations from an objective, aesthetic standpoint. For example, trendsetters see if they have the power to get us to wear new creations. Therefore, the only motivations that fashion is concerned with are formal social ones (Simmel, 1957: 544).

People who wear extreme fashions are generally the ones who are most concerned with personal appearance and therefore the most elegant, so that under any circumstances we would get the *impression* of something distinguished and aesthetically cultivated. For Simmel, "[t]his impression we credit to the questionable element of fashion, the latter appealing to our consciousness as the new and consequently most conspicuous feature of the complete ensemble" (1957: 544).

Simmel believes that fashion plays a more conspicuous role in modern times because social classes and standards have become so much more sharply accentuated, and fashion provides a perfect opportunity for emphasizing social differences (1957: 546). The desire for differentiation, especially by the upper classes, fuels the never-ending changes in fashion. As soon as a style becomes universally adopted, a new fashion takes its place, forming a condition of simultaneous beginning and end, transitoriness, and novelty. Simmel states:

> Few phenomena of social life possess such a pointed curve of consciousness as does fashion. As soon as the social consciousness attains to the highest point designated by fashion, it marks the beginning of the end for the latter. This transitory character of fashion, however, does not on the whole degrade it, but adds a new element of attraction (1957: 547).

If we feel certain that the object or style will disappear as quickly as it arrived, we refer to it as fashion. Furthermore, Simmel writes that "fashion furnishes an ideal field for individuals with dependent natures, whose self-consciousness, however, requires a certain amount of prominence, attention, and singularity. Fashion raises even the unimportant individual by making him representative of a class, the embodiment of a joint spirit" (1957: 548).

Here again we see the intermingling of antagonistic values. Adopting a social standard or norm does not call attention to the individual. However, the slightest infraction or opposition is usually noticed, which draws public attention and disapproval to the nonconformist. Simmel writes:

> It is peculiarly characteristic of fashion that it renders possible a social obedience, which at the same time is a form of individual differentiation. Fashion does this because in its very nature it represents a standard that can never be accepted by all. While fashion postulates a certain amount of general acceptance, it nevertheless is not without significance in characterization of the individual, for it emphasizes his personality not only through omission but also through observance (1957: 549).

In fact, the rise of democracy created a favorable condition for the leader to lead, but also allow themselves to be led. Simmel points to the dude to illustrate this point in the fashion arena, and refers to Bismarck as a leader of a constitutional government who also followed the group. Simmel proposes that the sensation of ruling and being ruled arises out of the spirit of democracy, and involves the combination of both a masculine and a feminine principle (1957: 549). Simmel believes:

> The very fact that this process goes on in the field of fashion only in an ideal attenuation, as it were, the fact that only the form of both elements is embodied in a content indifferent in itself, may lend to fashion a special attraction, especially for sensitive natures that do not care to concern themselves with robust reality (1957: 549).

Simmel acknowledges that "the same combination which extreme obedience to fashion acquires can be won also by opposition to it" (1957: 549).

Whether we adopt fashion or ignore it, the power of social forces "demands our dependence in some positive or negative manner. The man who consciously pays no heed to fashion accepts its forms just as much as the dude does, only he embodies it in another category, the former in that of exaggeration, the latter in that of negation" (Simmel, 1957: 550). The club-haters organize themselves into a club. Simmel wonders if those who choose to ignore fashion may be fearful of losing their individuality if they adopt the style and customs of the general public.

Simmel then launches into an analysis of women and fashion, sexist by today's standards, and perhaps even by the standards of the time, although he believes his thoughts to be quite reasonable. He believes that women are fashion's strongest adherents because fashion expresses and at the same time emphasizes the tendency toward equalization and individualization, as well as the desire for imitation and conspicuousness, but mostly because women are psychologically and socially weak (1957: 550). He writes:

> The relation and the weakness of her social position, to which woman has been doomed during the far greater portion of history, however, explains her strict regard for custom, for the generally accepted and approved forms of life, for all that is proper. A weak person steers clear of individualization; he avoids dependence upon self with its responsibilities and the necessity of defending himself unaided. He finds protection only in the typical form of life, which prevents the strong from exercising his exceptional powers. But resting on the firm foundation of custom, of what is generally accepted, woman strives anxiously for all the relative individualization and personal conspicuousness that remains (1957: 550).

Simmel continues on to say, "[f]ashion furnishes this very combination in the happiest manner, for we have here on the one hand a field of general imitation, the individual

floating in the broadest social current, relieved of responsibility for his tastes and his actions, yet on the other hand we have a certain conspicuousness, an emphasis, an individual accentuation of the personality" (1957: 550-551). To summarize his thoughts on women and fashion, Simmel states, "[t]hus it seems as though fashion were the valve through which woman's craving for some measure of conspicuousness and individual prominence finds vent, when its satisfaction is denied her in other fields" (1957: 551). For Simmel, fashion is a type of compensation for her "lack of position in a class based on a calling or profession" (1957: 551). Furthermore, "[f]ashion also supplements a person's lack of importance, his inability to individualize his existence purely by his own unaided efforts, by enabling him to join a set characterized and singled out in the public consciousness by fashion alone" (1957: 552).

Simmel highlights tensions that arise by attempting to reconcile the social, and its associated pressures to conform, to the desire to express individuality. In addition, Simmel discusses fashion in terms of a self-concealing process, where "sensitive and peculiar persons" use everyday fashion as a type of "mask" to deceive others about the individual depth of the soul (Simmel, 1957: 552). He states:

> They consider blind obedience to the standards of the general public in all externals as the conscious and desired means of reserving their personal feeling and their taste, which they are eager to reserve for themselves alone, in such a way that they do not care to enter in an appearance that is visible to all. It is therefore a feeling of modesty and reserve which causes many a delicate nature to seek refuge in the leveling cloak of fashion; such individuals do not care to resort to a peculiarity in externals for fear of perhaps betraying a peculiarity of their innermost soul (1957: 552).

Simmel believes that the soul triumphs over the actual circumstances of existence, and highlights the triviality of expression and conversation "through which very sensitive and

retiring people, especially women, often deceive one about the individual depth of the soul" (1957: 552). He writes:

> It is one of the pleasures of the judge of human nature, although somewhat cruel withal, to feel the anxiousness with which woman clings to the commonplace contents and forms of social intercourse. The impossibility of enticing her beyond the most banal and trite forms of expression, which often drives one to despair, in innumerable instances signifies nothing more than a barricade of the soul, an iron mask that conceals the real features and can furnish this service only by means of a wholly uncompromising separation of the feelings and the externals of life (1957: 553).

For Simmel, "fashion is based on adoption by a social set, which demands mutual imitation from its members and thereby releases the individual of all responsibility – ethical and aesthetic" (Simmel, 1957: 552). Fashion is a social form that "affects only the externals of life, only those sides of life which are turned to society. It provides us with a formula by means of which we can unequivocally attest our dependence upon what is generally adopted, our obedience to the standards established by our time, our class, and our narrower circle, and enables us to withdraw the freedom given us in life from externals and concentrate it more and more in our innermost natures" (Simmel, 1957: 554). Many people simply wish to be "uniformly governed, without thinking to inquire into the nature or value of the authority" (Simmel, 1957: 555). Perhaps a viable theoretical explanation of the leveling and deceptive aspects of fashion in earlier times, Simmel's theory encounters criticism from a number of sociologists, especially after the 1960s, who point to limitations involving essentialism and sexism. This is not to say that all women living prior to the 1960s dutifully obeyed fashion "rules." For example, women in the nineteenth century used men's clothing to show resistance to dominant definitions of gender (Crane, 2000).

Whatever the strengths and weaknesses, Simmel's "top-down" model of fashion continued to be the dominant form of fashion dissemination in the Western world until the 1960s, when economic and demographic factors allowed for the increasing influence of youth across most social layers (Crane, 2000: 14).

The social upheaval of the 1960s reversed the "trickle-down" theory of fashion suggested by Simmel to "trickle-up." That is, fashion as a means of social control gave way to fashion as a means of self-expression. At this point, the conventional theory where fashion designers and manufacturers cater to the wealthy, who wear the fashions until their social inferiors begin to copy them by purchasing cheaper imitations, proves incomplete for analyzing everyday fashion and accessories.

In terms of academic research, the study of fashion has been transformed across disciplines since the 1960s, coinciding with a growing interest in the study of the body. Scholars approached fashion and dress from a variety of perspectives that highlighted and criticized the marginal place of fashion within traditional academic scholarship (Entwistle and Wilson, 2001). The development of cultural studies in the late 1960s caused a gradual change in the way dress practices were perceived, and fashion became a more noteworthy area of scholarly interest, rather than wholesale dismissal as a frivolous endeavor unworthy of serious analysis. During this time, several authors interested themselves in sub-cultural style. Dick Hebdige (1979) and others contributed to the growing body of literature regarding youth culture and radical groups in society. Hippies, punks, and others signaled their dissidence through fashion choices, providing various opportunities for the semiotic analysis of both overt and hidden meanings (Entwistle and Wilson, 2001).

Alison Lurie (1981) and Roland Barthes (1985) saw the way dress communicated as a type of language. Entwistle and Wilson maintain:

> This may have been partly because it had become somewhat commonplace to assert the idea that fashion and dress are ubiquitous to culture, a fundamental feature which defines humanity. This apparent universality is one of the reasons why fashion and dress are often compared to language. Moreover, it would seem that fashion and language are part of the same fundamental human concern, namely to communicate. It is not surprising therefore to find the idea of language appropriated to explain dress and fashion (2001: 2).

As Entwistle and Wilson point out, this issue of communication seems to be far less clear in the area of clothing and accessories than it is with spoken language (2001: 3). For example, Fred Davis proposes that clothing is more like music than speech, suggestive and ambiguous instead of constrained by the precise grammatical rules semiologists tried to apply (Davis, 1992, Entwistle and Wilson, 2001: 3). Others suggest that clothing and accessories such as handbags are more like art than speech.

Although Simmel recognized that some fashion trendsetters were women who became actresses or courtesans, critics such as Diana Crane argue that this theory assumes new styles were widely adopted, but does not adequately address who did or did not adopt them. Pierre Bourdieu's theory of class reproduction and cultural tastes, as outlined in *Distinction* (1984), suggests that the dissemination of fashion was more involved than the process outlined by Simmel.

Bourdieu (1984) believes in an economy of cultural goods with a specific logic, and wishes to establish the conditions under which consumers of cultural goods, and their tastes for them, are produced and reproduced. At the same time, he describes the different ways of appropriating these objects and how the objects might be regarded at a particular moment as works of art, and the social conditions of the constitution of the mode of

appropriation that is considered legitimate. Bourdieu asserts that his research shows that "cultural needs are the product of upbringing and education (1984: 1). Bourdieu suggests, "[t]o the socially recognized hierarchy of the arts, and within each of them, of genres, schools or periods, corresponds a social hierarchy of the consumers. This predisposes tastes to function as markers of 'class'" (1984: 1-2).

Bourdieu points to social structures as complex systems of class cultures comprising sets of cultural tastes and associated lifestyles. Following Simmel, Bourdieu suggests that the upper class is the dominant and most prestigious culture, and possesses the power to set the terms through which tastes are assigned moral and social value (Bourdieu, 1984: 378). For Bourdieu, "[t]he social backgrounds and cultural practices of the middle and lower classes prevent them from fully assimilating the tastes of the upper class. The consumption of cultural goods associated with the upper and middle classes requires attitudes and knowledge that are not readily accessible to members of the working class" (Crane, 2000: 8). In this way, "Bourdieu's theory helps to explain how social classes and social structures are maintained over time but is less useful for understanding how people respond during periods of rapid social change" (Crane, 2000: 8).

However, Bourdieu importantly asserts that the significance or importance of the way culture has been acquired can only be appreciated by onlookers who understand and are able to decipher the cultural code of the work of the art, or the handbag. One must be in possession of the cultural competence required to decipher the code in order for the art or object to have meaning and interest. Therefore, if a woman parades through the public with a Hermes Birkin or Kelly handbag that costs thousands of dollars, but the onlookers

have never heard of Hermes before, then the impact of the bag and its meanings are lost. The decoding operation is unsuccessful due to the lack of a cultural code (Bourdieu, 1984).

Bourdieu's discussion of aesthetic theory serves to support my point regarding the handbag as functional, in contrast to a fetish found mostly in the upper classes. Bourdieu refers to Kantian notions of aesthetics, but suggests that judgements of contemporary works of art and other objects emerge from an aesthetic that is the exact opposite of the Kantian aesthetic. Bourdieu states:

> In order to apprehend what makes the specificity of aesthetic judgement, Kant ingeniously distinguished that which pleases from that which gratifies and, more generally, strove to separate disinterestedness, the sole guarantor of the specifically aesthetic quality of contemplation, from the interest of the senses, which defines the agreeable, and from the interest of Reason, which defines the Good. By contrast, *working-class people, who expect every image to fulfil a function,* if only that of a sign, refer, often explicitly, to norms of morality or agreeableness in all their judgements (1984: 41).

Bourdieu's thoughts on aesthetics and function show that there is a difference between that which pleases and that which fulfills a need. The expensive designer handbag pleases those who can afford it, and the ordinary inexpensive handbag exists to perform a function. Bourdieu clearly suggests that functionality is associated with the working-class. More specifically, disinterestedness is distinguished from the interest of reason, which defines what constitutes the good. Judgements made by the working-class often reference the norms of morality and have an ethical basis (Bourdieu, 1984: 41-42).

In an article that precedes *Distinction*, entitled *Le couturier et sa griffe* (The Couturier and his Signature) (1975), Bourdieu convincingly demonstrates that fashion and other domains of taste are inseparable from class distinction. Bourdieu

> ...characterizes the dynamics of the field of haute couture through its two poles: the established couturiers, who represent luxury, aristocracy, and elegance, versus the challengers, who emphasize their difference from established convention through the invocation of modernity, artistry, and the subversion of perfection" (Kondo, 1997: 114).

Regarding *Distinction*, however, Kondo asserts, "Bourdieu's project is to demystify the claims of high culture, showing how the supposedly transcendent domains of refined taste are constituted through a system of class distinction, permeated by the logic of cultural and symbolic capital. Fashion, music, political orientation, leisure, lifestyles, tastes in food, types of dwelling, and interior decoration become sites where class distinctions are articulated and reproduced" (Kondo, 1997: 110). Kondo goes on to say that Bourdieu's comprehensive methodological study, which includes a survey of over 1,200 respondents, charts, statistical tables, interviews, advertisements, photographs, and journal excerpts, cannot make up for the limitations of its conceptual foundationalisms. She states:

> Despite occasional protestations to the contrary, Bourdieu in the end appears to subscribe to a class-based objectivism that takes consciousness and meaning as ultimately derivative. Indeed, structure, culture, science, production, consumption, among other categories, remain unproblematized, rather than terms that must themselves be subject to interrogation. The Durkheimian legacy couples a classificatory imperative with an emphasis on social *science*, creating a matrix of closed categories that ultimately misses the fluidity of the social battles Bourdieu so richly describes in his vignettes. The lived nature of the classificatory *struggle* never sufficiently emerges from the totalizing grid of classification (Kondo, 1997: 110-111).

For Kondo, Bourdieu "assumes that he can exhaustively, objectively specify class and class fractions, precisely linking them with specific displays of taste" (1997: 111). Following Kondo's critique of both Barthes and Bourdieu, it seems apparent that women who carry handbags cannot be systematically classified into social classes based on the clothing that they wear or the bag that they carry. As mentioned earlier, women who

cannot afford to purchase the entire designer outfit will often just purchase the designer handbag. Working class women save for months or years in order to purchase a luxury status bag from designers such as Prada.

The fashion histories outlined by both Simmel and Bourdieu attempt to explain what was considered fashionable in certain time periods for certain social classes, but ascertaining what *ordinary* people actually wore in the past is more difficult and remains undeveloped by these theorists. Crane's work fills this gap only for nineteenth century working class fashion.

Baudrillard states, "[a]s we "consume" the code, in effect, we "reproduce" the system (1981: 5). This is an important process, and Baudrillard further argues, "[a]n accurate theory of objects will not be established upon a theory of needs and their satisfactions, but upon a theory of *prestations* and *signification*" (1981: 30). For Baudrillard, the sign exchange value is the most fundamental aspect of the object, and it is this type of sign exchange that is under consideration in this thesis.

Gilles Lipovetsky adopts "Baudrillard's emphasis on the totalizing logic of fashion into historical terrain" (Kondo, 1997: 115). Lipovetsky convincingly analyzes the emergence of fashion historically, and demonstrates how its appearance was coextensive with modernity. Lipovestsky criticizes Bourdieu for focusing on fashion only as a site of class struggle. Fashion for Lipovetsky is much more than a class issue; it constitutes a democratizing influence and a sign of modernity that "promotes individualization and the formation of consumer-subjects who hold the democratic values of tolerance, pluralism, and openness to transformation" (Kondo,1997: 115).

For Lipovetsky, fashion opens up possibilities of mobility and change by disrupting the traditional class order through the glorification of youthfulness. Kondo points out that, "[l]ike Bourdieu, Lipovetsky subscribes to a conceptual scheme that problematically separates culture from structure. Against Bourdieu's analysis of class *structure*, he stresses the centrality of modern *cultural* values and significations, in particular that of the New, which permeates fashion and forms the basis of modern democratic society" (1997: 115). However convincing Lipovetsky's argument for the coexistence of fashion and modernity, Kondo suggests, "his appraisal of fashion as a domain fostering democratic values uncritically reinscribes liberal humanist presuppositions about the subject and about power" (1997: 115). Kondo argues, "he celebrates the notion of the individual (the always already whole subject), who chooses and who is conditioned to accept the New. There is too little acknowledgment of the ways the emergence of the liberal humanist choosing subject is above all a consumer-subject, inextricable from the growth of capitalism and the formation of bourgeois possessive individualism. Lipovetsky's embracing of this choosing subject inevitably erases these histories of power and domination" (1997: 115). Kondo states: "Indeed, Bourdieu shows that the valorization of the New among the couturiers and the managerial classes is simply part of the struggle for legitimacy among the dominant classes, a struggle that never seriously jeopardizes class hierarchy itself. And because Lipovetsky accepts as foundational divisions such as public/private, he fails to account for the ways public social forces intersect in, and construct, the private. Consequently, he cannot effectively come to terms with Bourdieu's class analysis (1997: 115). Kondo suggests that Lipovetsky fails against Bourdieu's class distinction since:

> Lipovetsky argues that in a society permeated by the logic of fashion, individuals no longer buy with an eye toward social recognition or social competition, but keep uppermost the purely private values of functionality and individual well-being. Yet as Bourdieu eloquently argued, these seemingly private values can in fact be produced and reproduced through "public" discourses and are far from innocent of class distinction. Lipovetsky ultimately becomes a liberal humanist cheerleader for fashion (1997: 116).

Kondo concludes her analysis of Barthes, Bourdieu, Lipovetsky, and Baudrillard by stating:

> In different ways, these theorists of fashion offer insights into the fashion world. Barthes argues for fashion as a signifying system. Despite its class foundationalism and totalizing classificatory imperative, Bourdieu's insightful work on fashion provides a political and conceptual frame for understanding the dynamics of the avant-garde in fashion and the inextricability of taste from class reproduction. Lipovetsky and Baudrillard mark the pervasiveness of the logic of fashion in our regime of capitalist (post)modernity, while Lipovetsky's fissuring of Bourdieu's narrative of relentless class reproduction leads to a critical reappraisal of Bourdieu's description of the fashion world. Finally, Baudrillard articulates the possibilities for always already complicitous critique in a commoditized world defined by fashion (1997: 116).

Kondo argues that these theories are mediated through a highly problematic, Eurocentric gaze, and asks what happens to their Western narratives of signification when other axes of power, such as gender, race, sexuality, and (neo)colonialism are considered (1997: 116). She specifically asks, "[w]ithout a broader consideration of these issues, can we adequately address the possibilities for contestation in this elitist, highly problematic domain?" (1997: 116).

This, of course, is a very good question, and one worthy of serious consideration. In the case of handbags, it remains difficult to assume that a woman carrying an expensive designer bag is a wealthy member of the middle or upper class, since a working class woman may have also acquired an expensive bag by saving her money until she could purchase one, or by receiving it as a gift (like Kate Hudson's character in

the film *Le Divorce*). While it is true that handbags exist as a commodity in the global realm, and that certain handbags are thought to be associated with certain types of women, these assumptions become problematic because handbags regularly cross class lines. Handbags are not necessarily indicative of gender either, as evident in the case of cross-dressers. Finally, the handbag is not an accurate indicator of age, since females of every age can carry any type of bag that they choose to carry.

The handbag cannot be simply taken at face value, since it has the ability and freedom to escape rigid classification according to social class, status, wealth, race, sexuality, ethnicity, and even gender in some cases. Therefore, using earlier fashion theories and taking their limitations into account, I continue my quest to problematize handbags and disrupt existing narratives, Western or otherwise.

Contemporary society offers a variety of choices in lifestyles. This variety of choices liberates the individual from tradition and thereby enables the individual to make choices in creating a meaningful self-identity (Giddens, 1991). It is important to note that while we are free to construct our identities, most of us do so by choosing from a limited range of roles and options. In reality, there are different scripts that we can adopt or engage with, not an unlimited range. Furthermore:

> The construction and presentation of self have become major preoccupations as a person continually reassesses the importance of past and present events and commitments. A person constructs a sense of her identity by creating 'self-narratives' that contain her understandings of her past, her present, and her future. These understandings change continually over time as she reassesses her 'ideal' self in relation to her changing perceptions of her mental and physical selves on the basis of past and present experience (Crane, 2000: 10).

Anthony Giddens's theory, for example, suggests that social class is becoming less important in the formation of self-image due to increasing rates of intra- and inter-class

mobility. Fragmentation of cultural interests within social classes is replacing class cultures. A staggering number of specialized individual interests emerge from this fragmentation, far too many to be accounted for by Simmel's class theory or Bourdieu's calculus of distinction. These multiple and institutionalized cultures rely upon standards that are highly variable, and the media accentuates the differences between lifestyles by segmentation of media channels and exploitation by advertisers and marketing experts (Crane, 2000). The result is " 'hypersegmentation,' which isolates each lifestyle in its own niche" (Crane, 2000: 10). Crane proposes that participating in a certain lifestyle, as compared with retaining membership in a particular social class, presumes a higher level of agency on the part of the individual. In the economic arena:

> People make choices that require the continual assessment and evaluation of consumer goods and activities in light of their potential contributions to identities or images they are attempting to project. From time to time, a person is likely to alter her lifestyle, and, as large numbers of people engage in this process, the characteristics of lifestyles themselves evolve and change. Ultimately, social classes are less homogenous, because they are fragmented into different but continually evolving lifestyles based on leisure activities, including consumption (Crane, 2000: 10).

Once outside the economic sphere, Crane suggests that "the basis for stratification are cultural configurations based on lifestyles, values, and conceptions of personal and gender identity. Leisure activities, including consumption, shape people's perceptions of themselves and are more meaningful than work for many people" (Crane, 2000: 10). Crane points out that, "[w]ithin the leisure sphere, social affiliations based on age, race and ethnicity, and gender and sexual orientation are particularly salient. People at all social class levels consume material culture in order to enhance their identification with specific groups but not with the society as a whole. They tend to identify with very narrow and very specific cultural interests (Crane, 2000: 14).

The body must also be acknowledged as part of the discussion regarding handbags, culture, class, and gender, since a handbag requires a body part such as a hand or shoulder to carry it. Peter Gurney discusses the notions of the "classical" and "grotesque" body, and reminds us that this Bakhtinian vocabulary accentuates the differences in the way the body is imaged within "high" and "low" cultural discourses (Gurney, 1997: 279). Gurney elaborates:

> Bakhtin noted the contradiction between the representation of the human body in the classical statuary of the Renaissance and the body as represented in popular festivities. The cultural elite tended to legitimate and strengthen their power by 'appealing to values inherent in the classical body'. That body was 'closed' (that is, it had no openings or orifices), raised, individuated, disciplined. The 'grotesque' body, by contrast, was 'open' (orifices, genitals, buttocks, and bellies were emphasized), licensed, and was usually multiple or part of a crowd (1997: 279).

Superimposing this terminology, a woman who carries a handbag corresponds with the description of an "open" or "grotesque" body. A handbag is, after all, an essentially open, pouchy space in which to place things. It can be seen as undisciplined, receiving, and submissive, instead of closed, unwelcoming, or rigid. In this sense, the handbag is dominated, not the dominator. It is weak and passive, not strong and disciplined. It is, in line with patriarchal meaning, decidedly feminine.

On the other hand, the opposite argument could also be made. That is, the handbag is also a private receptacle where items are hidden from sight, particularly items to manage the grotesque body such as tissues and tampons. The handbag may also service a number of different people at the same time. For example, one handbag might hold the makeup, keys, and cash of several individuals who are out on the town for the evening. These situations highlight the idea of the handbag as a fluid polyvalent signifier, and its double/fluid meaning of that which is sometimes feared.

Gurney goes on to say that, following Pierre Bourdieu, "the social control of body functions like yawning, spiting, ejecting mucus, eating, and so forth are vital to the organization of society in general and also inform the construction of subjectivity" (Gurney, 1997:279). This latter quote exemplifies part of the reason why Bourdieu's sociology is questioned later in this thesis as overly organizational or systematic for analyzing handbags, and the work of Judith Butler is shown to be more relevant for the project at hand.

In discussing handbags and the body, it is difficult to ignore that "handbag" begins with "hand," and that handbags are often considered to be extensions of the body. Consider what Renate Schulz has to say about hands.

> *The mystical power of the hand is captured in the metaphors of our spiritual moral and everyday language. We speak of the hand of God, the healing hand and the hand that rocks the cradle. We give our hands in marriage, lend a helping hand and sometimes let things get out of hand. Automatically, we use our hands in combinations of strength, delicacy, precision and grace. The dancer creates visual magic with her hands. The hands of a climber grip fiercely the face of a rock cliff, while the hands of a pianist deftly coax sensuous musical nuances from piano keys. Hands can comfort and command, beckon and menace, build and destroy. Hands make war and love at the same time. They can heal and they can kill.*
>
> *Our hands are both text and tool. Silently they hold our life stories: age is revealed in the brown spots and blue-grey veins; identity is inscribed in the pattern of whorls and loops on the fingertips, an unalterable signature, set well before birth. Even if the skin of our fingertips is accidentally removed through injury, it grows back in the identical formation. Our hands cannot lie. If we want to hide our feelings, we can shape the expression of our face and smile while our heart cries. If we want to disguise our age we can pay for makeovers and endure tucks or lifts, but our hands are immune to those vanities. We cannot mask what they express. They speak their own stories and reveal us in ways we don't even realize. Instinctively, when we clasp our hands, the left thumb covers the right thumb, or vice versa. The superposition of the right thumb is found in people who are realistic, who are rational thinkers and whose reactions are based on reasoning. If you clasp your hands and the left thumb rests on top, this suggests that instinctive feelings and intuition act as major driving forces in your life and*

that your reactions are mainly based on emotional responses, not logical reasoning" (Schulz, 2001: 251-257).

The Romans were the first to place wedding rings on the third finger of the left hand because they believed that this finger had a nerve that goes straight to the heart, and it is intriguing to consider the ancient belief that the lines in our palms express our individuality. Hands play an important role in facilitating the body's efficiency and autonomy, which, in turn, affects the meaning of our lives. Bags are representative of hands, an extension of the body enabling both autonomy and vulnerability, signaling independence, wealth, indifference, professionalism, academia, motherhood, childhood, old age, drag. Many women choose to not carry a handbag at all because they want their hands to remain free. It is for all of these reasons that I wish to problematize handbags.

Chapter Two: Why Handbags?

> *I find that it is vital to have at least one handbag for each of the ten types of social occasion: Very Formal, Not So Formal, Just a Teensy Bit Formal, Informal But Not That Informal, Every Day, Every Other Day, Day Travel, Night Travel, Theater, and Fling – Miss Piggy* (Johnson, 2002: 128).

> *Most people don't realize that some people expend tremendous energy merely to be normal – Albert Camus*

> "*I'm the smartest dumb person I know. I'm one of those messy purse girls*"- *Cynthia*

The carrying of essential objects is something that concerns most of us throughout our adult lives. Even small children, boys and girls alike, carry small bags or backpacks to daycare and to school, containing items such as food, toys, school supplies, and so on. Bags for children are both utilitarian and decorative, and, as is the case for adults, they say something to the world about the owner. Children are able to carry the items necessary for negotiating the day, while sporting the latest superhero or film star on the bag's exterior. It is the images and (often designer) logos displayed on the exterior of the bag, as well as such things as style, shape, color, and so on, that relay messages about the owner to onlookers. Walking the hallways of an elementary or junior high school quickly shows that young boys do not carry bright pink bags with images of Barbie on them, but young girls do. Boys are more likely to display action heroes or movie themes, or to carry backpacks that are plain black and entirely devoid of any illustrations or logos. The backpacks of high school students are almost entirely devoid of decoration aside from brand names. There are a number of issues involved here, too many to be properly addressed in this thesis; however, I do wish to say something regarding the carrying of bags and gender identity.

Regarding the gender issue, at the present time, males and females from adolescence onward employ different systems for carrying necessities. In general, men carry what they need in their pockets, and women store items in handbags that are not securely fastened to clothing, but carried in the hand or slung over a shoulder. As J. C. Flugel points out, "[b]oth systems have serious disadvantages" (1966: 186). He relates:

> Men tend to lose their articles in their multitude of pockets; the pockets themselves are not at all conveniently accessible when overcoats are worn in winter; and when, as so often, they are filled to bulging point, they seriously deform the tailor's handiwork; lastly, the necessity for removing a variety of separate articles from a number of receptacles takes considerable time (often longer than the actual process of changing a suit) and frequently leads to some essential article being overlooked (1966: 186).

With regard to the female dilemma, Flugel writes, "...the system at present in vogue among women has even greater drawbacks, namely, that the loosely carried bag is easily lost or stolen and that it involves the use of a hand that should be free for other purposes" (1966: 187). Summing up the problem faced by both genders, he states, "[f]ew things really bear better witness to the utter absence of rational thought about our clothing than that this matter should be left to chance or fashion" (1966: 187). He calls for experimental study, which would encompass the practical, psychological, physiological, sartorial, and aesthetic aspects concerned. Meanwhile, he states:

> ...it would seem as if the solution would lie in the direction of a combination of the present male and female methods. The advantages of having loose articles contained in a bag, pouch, or wallet (or at least in a few of these receptacles), rather than in a great number of pockets, is pretty obvious; but so, also, is the benefit of having this receptacle securely attached to the body, thus leaving free the hands (1966: 187).

More specifically, Flugel suggests:

> Attachment to a belt or girdle round the waist seems the most hopeful method in the case of receptacles containing small articles constantly in use, and some of the bags carried in this way in earlier times were far from ugly. For carrying any

> heavier articles that are less frequently required, the knapsack surely points to the correct method (1966: 187).

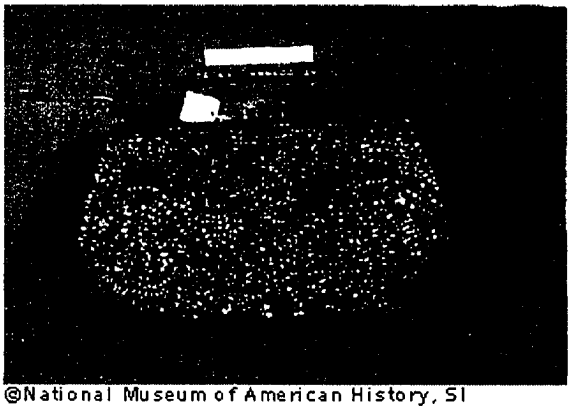
Flugel brings up the issue of restrictiveness, in contrast to mobility issues, and nostalgically calls for a return to historical methods of carrying essential items. Problematizing handbags brings numerous ideas and issues to light, both in contemporary times and times gone past. Looking back, bags and references to bags can be found in art, literature, politics, and popular media.

In sixteenth century Europe, Albrecht Durer represented the purity of the Virgin Mary by the closed pouch of Joachim (Johnson, 2002: xiv; Honour and Fleming, 2000). Throughout the history of sacred art, the Virgin Mary's hands are shown either clasped together as if in prayer, extended upward as if embracing heaven, or embracing her son, all signs of feminine purity (Honour and Fleming, 2000: 464-513). Quite often, virgins and prudes are depicted in art forms carrying bags that are firmly snapped shut or clutched to the chest.

Later, psychiatrist Sigmund Freud became suspicious of the handbag, referring to it as a "vagina dentata." Freud coined the term vagina dentata, asserting that "[p]robably no male human being is spared the terrifying shock of threatened castration at the sight of the female genitals" (http://kspark.kaist.ac.kr/Freud/Freud.htm). The vagina dentata, or toothed vagina, has often been the cause of male anxiety and fear concerned with the castrating ability of the female body. Freud is well known for his fearful theories, such as the Oedipus complex, and the secret interior of a woman's handbag could be seen as a potentially dangerous place for men to venture.

Freud's fears, however, are no match for the legends created by images of famous women and their handbags. Several noteworthy women offer memorable examples of recognition with this most feminine of everyday objects. For instance, in 1953, Mamie Eisenhower, wife of Dwight Eisenhower, created quite a stir when she arrived at their first inaugural ball sparkling in a pale pink silk gown sprinkled with rhinestones, carrying small, rounded silk pouch in the same pale pink as the dress, as shown on page 149. The handbag was the most remarkable part of her outfit. With its overlay of pink lace embroidered with pearls and rhinestones, and its double rhinestone closure, the handbag was an unlikely testament to everything President Eisenhower had fought for. General Eisenhower played a key role in defeating fascism in Europe eight years earlier, and Mamie exuded a unique combination of Midwestern glamour tempered with practicality. Together, the Eisenhowers represented a timely new era of hope and possibility in America.

The pairing of Mamie and her show-stopping handbag was especially poignant since Judith Leiber, the designer of the handbag, might not have survived World War II if it had not been for soldiers such as General Eisenhower. Leiber achieved great success as a handbag designer after moving to America, but she did not realize that the handbag she designed for Mamie, which is now housed in the "First Ladies Hall of the National Museum of American History, represented much more than just a permanent accessory to a historic moment" (http://www.smithsonianmag.si.edu/smithsonian/issues01/sep01/object.html)



There are other historical instances where famous women carried handbags that also became famous. In 1956, Grace Kelly appeared in *Life* magazine elegantly shielding her pregnant stomach from the paparazzi with a Hermes handbag, shown on page 150 (http://www.geocities.com/Hollywood/Studio/8255/style/Kellybag.jpg). Kelly's demure gesture in this handbag moment "launched a collective fantasy: that a bag could make you a diplomat, a diva, and a survivor. That a bag could transform your existence from commoner to princess" (Johnson, 2002: xvi).

The following discussion exemplifies and enhances these theoretical observations, and adds to understanding the relationship between media figures, royalty, and movie stars. In the late 1960s, Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis carried a Hermes bucket-shaped handbag around Capri, seen on page151, instantly making it famous and sought after. Subsequently dubbed the "Trim," Hermes had simply added a scooped gusset and skinny strap to the original feed bag version created in 1958, and waited for the endorsement of a famous woman (Johnson, 2002: 5). Similarly, the restyled Lady Dior luxury handbag became an overnight success when Madame Chirac presented one as a gift to Lady Diana

in 1995, reviving the legend of the princess and the handbag that began with Princess Grace.

Queen Elizabeth is always seen carrying a handbag. Apparently, she uses her handbag for more than just housing her personal items. Her staff is trained to read the positioning of the bag; for example, if the Queen tilts her bag in a certain direction during a royal ceremony, it means that she has to go to the bathroom, and wants an excuse to temporarily leave the room without drawing attention to herself and the reason for her departure. The public is so interested in the Queen's handbags, that one website addressed the question: "What does Queen Elizabeth Carry in that Purse?" (http://www.straightdope.com/classics/a3_318.html). Participants suggested that she carried identification, makeup, carfare, or nothing at all (the purse was simply a security blanket). A press aide at Buckingham Palace is reported to have said that the Queen carries items of "a personal nature," but not money. Upon further questioning, the aide said "you'd find what you'd expect to find in a woman's purse" (http://www.straightdope.com/classics/a3_318.htm). I wonder what people *expect* a woman to carry in her purse? In any event, it is interesting to consider the relationship between handbags and media figures, royalty, and movie stars.

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, Diana Vreeland, fashion editor for *Harper's Bazar* and then editor-in-chief at *Vogue*, urged women to "ban the bag," and equip pants and coats with large pockets instead. Vreeland, a highly esteemed fashion guru, believed "[e]legance is innate. It has nothing to do with being well-dressed. Elegance is refusal. Pleasure is everything (http://www.quotemeonit.com/vreeland.html). Germaine Greer, one of the most important voices in the gender wars and author of *The Female Eunuch* and *The*

Whole Woman, railed against the handbag, insisting that it was the symbolic vessel of women's servile role in society (Johnson, 2002: xiv). Greer refuses to carry a handbag herself (http://www.abetterwoman.net/culture.html).

A handbag is featured in *The Importance of Being Ernest*, and handbags also play key roles in many other television shows and big screen films. Most people have watched a show or film where someone gets clobbered with a handbag, usually wielded by a woman against a man. The scene from *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* comes to mind. Actress and comedian Ruth Buzzy was famous for using her handbag as a weapon, and audiences laughed and loved her for it. On the television show *Friends*, Matt LeBlanc's character, Joey, began carrying a handbag much to his friends' surprise and amusement, and even showed up at an acting audition with it in tow. Joey did not get the part, and there was much discussion about whether the producers rejected him because of the handbag.

In the movie, *The Firm*, actress Jean Tripplehorn's character carries a potent drug in her tiny evening bag, which she secretly drops into her date's drink, rendering him unconscious and vulnerable. In the film entitled *Le Divorce,* actress Kate Hudson's character receives an expensive Kelly bag from a new Parisian lover. She is thrilled with the luxurious, deep red handbag, and carries it everywhere she goes, only to discover that the bag immediately identifies her as the "Kelly Man's" mistress. As it turns out, her new man is widely known for giving his new lovers a Kelly bag, and she has been branded for all to see. The prized Kelly bag is eventually used to conceal a handgun, a murder weapon, and it plays a central role throughout the film in terms of identity and symbolism

(http://www.le-divorce.com/buzz-usatoday.html). Here we see the common trope of privacy and secrecy with shades of Freud's fears of the vagina, this time with a gun.

In a past episode of *Sex and the City,* an Hermes Birkin bag became an object of desire that was aggressively sought out and haggled over. Actress Kim Cattrall, who plays the character of Samantha, so desperately wants a Birkin bag that she lies to the Hermes publicity director (in a tirade liberally sprinkled with four-letter words). She demands a Birkin for her client Lucy Liu, who plays herself, but, of course, Samantha really wants the bag for herself. Since the bag was for a famous actress, Hermes dispenses with the long waiting list, and the bag arrives in all of its glory (www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A37117-2004Jan21.html?nav=hptop_tb).

The Birkin bag, originally designed for actress Jane Birkin in 1984, can be backordered for up to two and a half years, and costs the equivalent of "two first class tickets to Gstaad" (Johnson, 2002: 41). The least expensive Birkin bag costs about $6,000 US and the most expensive bag, made from crocodile with solid gold closures encrusted with diamonds, goes for $85,000 US (http://www.loper.org/~george/trends/2004/Jan/marthabag.jpg. Every Birkin bag is a handcrafted original, hence the time delay (http://www.nytimes.com/slideshow/2003/11/28/magazine/20031130HERMES.SLIDESHOW_1.html). At the present time, Hermes has closed the absurdly long waiting list. Now there is a wait to get on the waiting list, no matter how many platinum credit cards are waved. That is, unless you happen to be a famous celebrity (http://www.loper.org/~george/trends/2004/Jan/marthabag.jpg). This handbag equivalent of a Rolls Royce is a carefully handmade work of art that announces to the world that one has

achieved a dazzling level of success. In fact, "[I]t can declare its owner's wealth and status from a distance of 50 paces" (http://www/loper.org/~george/trends/2004/Jan/marthabag.jpg). Just ask Martha Stewart.

Martha Stewart, businesswoman extraordinare, charged with conspiracy, obstruction of justice and securities fraud, arrived on her first day in federal court carrying two handbags, shown on page 152. One appeared to be an ordinary tote, roomy enough to store files and the arsenal of electronic organizers that a typical businesswoman might need to carry. The other bag, and the one that created such a stir, was a Birkin bag, imbued with Hermes status, wealth, and privilege. Carrying the Birkin into the courtroom proved to be a mistake for Stewart. While polls showed that some observers see Stewart as an unfairly accused wealthy businesswoman, others see her as an arrogant businesswoman who thought that her success placed her actions above the law. Displaying the Birkin was "the equivalent of a male mogul arriving at the courthouse with an expensive stogie clenched between his teeth. Stewart's Birkin was a hand-stitched symbol of the underlying issues – the privileges of success – that have so agitated her detractors. Her advisers have weighed in on a host of issues related to her image, but her choice of handbag was not among them"
(http://www/loper.org/~george/trends/2004/Jan/marthabag.jpg).

Handbags, large or small, can contain just about anything to be used anywhere, anytime, and carry a multiplicity of meanings for both the owner and the onlooker. In addition to signifying class, status, and weaponry, or the illusion thereof, a handbag can also carry political clout and recognition. For example, Margaret Thatcher rarely went anywhere without her handbag, which she always referred to as her "trusty companion."

In fact, "Fleet Street feared the parliamentary power of Margaret Thatcher to the extent that a new term for bullying and political coercion was added to the *Oxford English Dictionary*: handbagging" (Johnson, 2002: xv). Thatcher's ever-present handbag "helped add a new political meaning to the verb, handbagging, now used to describe a female politician's attack on a male opponent or colleague" (http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/190629.stm). One wonders whether this term emerged out of feelings of fear or untrustworthiness where powerful women are concerned. Interestingly, the Churchill Archives Centre at Cambridge, a serious historical collection that does not include Sir Winston's briefcases or wallets, is considering adding one of Thatcher's handbags to its archive of her reign as Prime Minister. The contents of the handbag will not be included because "it was not the contents but the way it was carried – and used – that gave the bag its place in history" (http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/190629.stm).

Handbags fulfill dreams, act as weapons, conceal any number of items, and signify various things, but they are also associated with the feelings of fear, violation, and guilt. An Alberta woman ran this classified ad in the newspaper: "Sandra S. I stole your purse from Corner Place in the late '80s. I'm deeply ashamed. Please forgive me" (Loyie, 2003: B1). The article states:

> When Jensen was 16 years old, she and her best friend stole a purse from the Corner Place, a restaurant where they used to hang out in Southgate Mall. The purse belonged to an older girl they knew, Sandra Sands, but they didn't know that until they looked inside. They took Sands's bank card and threw away her purse and its contents. Later that night...[Sands] was hysterical. She was wondering if we had seen her purse. She was locked out of her apartment, she didn't have her bank card, she didn't have anything, said Jensen, now 34 (Loyie, 2003: B1).

Years later, Jensen said "I want her to know I'm sorry and I would love to pay for a new purse and make restitution. It was the stupidest thing I have ever done" (Loyie, 2003: B1). Jensen said that she had been haunted by guilt all of these years.

Kleptomaniacs and garden-variety shoplifters alike tend to hide stolen goods in handbags (Hall, 1935; Cleary, 1986; Fein and Maskell, 1975). Hollywood actress Winona Ryder made headlines when she was arrested for stealing items of clothing from Saks Fifth Avenue, and hiding them in her handbag. Adela Pinch writes about genteel theft in Victorian England, where pieces of lace would make their way into a lady's handbag, and discusses the crossing of borders between shop, street, and home (Pinch, 1998). Pinch elaborates on nineteenth century wealthy women and shoplifting by pointing out other borders that are evoked, such as national borders that aided and impeded the luxury goods of the time, the borders between genders, and the borders between social classes (Pinch, 1998).

Woodman and Keltner (2002) discuss adult women and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) from a psychiatric perspective using "Cynthia" as a case study. "*I'm the smartest dumb person I know. I'm one of those messy purse girls,*" Cynthia is quoted as saying at the beginning of this academic article. Cynthia is a 35 year old married woman who was diagnosed with ADHD while undergoing counseling for depression following a miscarriage (Woodman and Keltner, 2002: 69). In this study, Cynthia reports: "My house is a trail through books and piles of just about everything else. When my husband comes home from work, I have nothing tangible to answer the question, 'What have you been doing all day?' And of course, my purse is always such a

mess, and I wonder if that reflects my state of mind. I wish I could be one of those neat purse girls" (Woodman and Keltner, 2002: 69).

Woodman and Keltner explain that Cynthia wishes to be a "neat purse girl," a good girl. Interestingly, the researchers invite the reader to:

> Consider for a moment Cynthia's idea that women can be metaphorically separated into two discrete categories, the 'neat purse girls,' and the 'messy purse girls.' It serves as a paradigm for society's concept of the ideal woman, as well as a reminder of the many unwritten cultural expectations associated with being female (read: feminine). One assumes the neat purse girls are organized, responsible, on top of things, intelligent, competent, independent, and capable of meeting the demands of everyday life. The neat purse girl makes good grades, she might be head cheerleader, homecoming queen, student body president, in the drama club – a woman one imagines could head a Fortune 500 company, serve as president of the PTA, and have a wonderful marriage and family (2002: 72).

Apparently, there are huge expectations attached to carrying a well-organized purse, and I wonder if we can accurately read all of these expectations from the handbag. Eventually, Woodman and Keltner concede that there is "no real correlation between having an organized purse and having an organized life, but this feminine archetype has the uncanny ability to make many women feel inferior" (2002: 72). According to Woodman and Keltner, messy purse girls wonder "What does 'she' know that I don't?" "Why am I so different?" "What's wrong with me?" (2002: 72).

Woodman and Keltner explain that ADHD is generally considered to be a childhood disorder, but in reality many women suffer from the disorder, yet remain undiagnosed. ADHD is a disorder commonly found in young males, but these researchers suggest that the disorder is just as prevalent in females. While males are overdiagnosed, ADHD seems to be the diagnosis *du jour,* as a result of increased awareness and familiarity of the disorder in males, but females remain underdiagnosed due to later age of onset, different manifestations in females, and *DSM* criteria (2002: 70). For Cynthia,

who doesn't want to be a messy purse girl, unfortunately, the messiness extends far beyond the purse, and everything about her life feels messy – her environment, her relationships, and even her thoughts – and because of this, her self-esteem plummets. She knows that something is amiss and she learns quickly to avoid calling attention to herself so as not to let her inadequacies be known to others. She overcompensates and desperately tries to fit in so that she can appear to be "normal." This is Cynthia's daily struggle. Sometimes she succeeds and sometimes she doesn't – appearing "normal" is hard work. It is this struggle that brings on depression, eating disorders, anxiety disorders, social phobias, and substance abuse, all of which mask the underlying problem which is ADHD (Woodman and Keltner, 2002: 72). The authors conclude that this is a "tragedy because, in being misdiagnosed, or not diagnosed at all, everyone is missing out. These messy purse girls have much more potential than the state of their purses might suggest" (Woodman and Keltner, 2002: 72).

The importance and significance of handbags appear in certain works of literature. For example, Susan Hahn (2002) wrote a poem entitled, *Her Purse, At The Winter Solstice:*

The needled red tea roses were distorted
by the quilt in the fabric of the cheap cotton
bag she carried through the filth
of snow to the transfusions

and back again to her bed
where she fanned herself
into the soft pink blankets and then closed
into them like a small item,
lost, Sometimes I couldn't find her –

a swansdown powder puff,
misplaced. All night

I'd dream of black taffeta, locked inside
A day bag of white painted metal plaques
or an evening clutch of lacquered brass,
covered with ash, ribbed silk. Her purse

had too deep a background,
where blossoms were pinned down
- stitch to stitch - with
never a hope they could climb off
and into the coming spring air, join

the others. I'd dream of a framed
French carryall, pale blue silk
and silver thread worked into
a pattern of a spider web, finished

with a tassel of carved steel
beads, my fingers constantly being cut
by handles decorated with flowered urns
and the cold heads of the sphinxes.

In Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, Anna contemplates whether she should continue to live her tortured life or commit suicide. Anna's eventual suicide is foreshadowed by her symbolic act of tossing away her red handbag before throwing herself under the wheels of a moving train. Tolstoy writes: "And exactly at the moment when the midpoint between the wheels drew level with her, she threw away the red bag, and drawing her head back into her shoulders, fell on her hands under the car, and, with a light movement, as though she would rise immediately, dropped on her knees" (Tolstoy, 1965: 798). When Anna throws away her handbag, the reader understands implicitly that she will die, since all must be lost if a woman willingly discards her handbag.

Survivalist, Archivist, Homemaker

In examining handbags as a representation of the self, I present three distinct, but often overlapping, female handbag-carrying personae: the survivalist, the curator, and the homemaker. These three personae overlap where all three are mothers, and differ greatly

when handbags become a site of resistance used by cross-dressers. In addition, the complete absence of a handbag can also be seen as a form of resistance, a refusal to comply with socially constructed expectation and responsibility.

Although several sources of the self exist, and categories of identity often conflate and conflict, handbags persist as representations of the self. Whether handbags represent partial or whole identities, they remain representations, and these representations are unmistakably feminine.

Handbags are dark inside, and their contents have an air of secrecy about them. Who knows for sure what women choose to carry around with them? It is this measure of secrecy that makes carrying a handbag risky. Circus clowns play a trick where a handbag is "stolen" from an unsuspecting audience member as part of the show. The crafty clown proceeds to empty the contents of the handbag on the stage. A momentary hush falls over the audience as the objects, which were previously hidden from view, are exposed for all to see. Of course, a silly wig is revealed, along with a huge bra and other such objects designed to bring forth laughter, and the uncomfortable moment of a secret unexpectedly revealed passes amid hilarity.

Similarly, a woman shopping in a store accidentally drops her handbag, and she hurriedly bends down to retrieve the rolling items that were tucked safely away just moments ago. A miniature package of tissue, a lipstick, and a tampon go rolling across the floor before the woman quickly retrieves them and drops them back into the dark. She resumes her shopping, hoping that no one witnessed this embarrassment. Why are people sometimes uncomfortable with the contents of a woman's purse? Why do women engage in the risky behavior of carrying purses?

Although handbags are commonplace in contemporary times, they sometimes represent mausoleums in which anachronistic feminine roles have been preserved. The purse is the crash site where at least two roles collide: the perfect housewife, who finds a use for every stray pen and wet wipe that she encounters, and that of the professional woman who is always on the run. When women discuss their handbags, they often proudly claim to be prepared for any disaster that they might encounter by saying "I have everything I need to survive in my handbag in case I get trapped somewhere," or "my life is in my purse." According to Harris, "[i]n every woman's purse there lurks a hidden survivalist, a crazed Mormon busily stocking her pantry for the coming apocalypse" (1997: 27).

As curators, grandmothers and other elderly women often unthinkingly store useless objects in their handbags, and then acquire a puzzled look when asked why they carry these things around with them. Used Kleenex, empty lipstick tubes, a theatre ticket from five years ago, a lint-covered cough drop, and other such items are commonly found in the handbags of these women who defy the fleeting nature of outward fashion statements. Harris says: "The purse preserves an archaic woman whose habits of possessiveness were established in a culture of durable goods immune to obsolescence, things that were meant to be treasured and cared for an entire life. This quaint Victorian ghost still haunts the modern purse, acting as the overprotective curator of a woman's cherished belongings" (1997: 27). Perhaps these women have failed to adapt to a culture of instant trash, and tote around the refuse of consumerism instead.

Residing along with the handbag's resident survivalist and curator, the clever economizer-type domestic engineer is yet another female personality. The conscientious

economizer squirrels away both useful and useless items because "you never know when you might need them." These preparations for a rainy day allow women to feel secure and efficient when an occasion calls for the retrieval of a stored item. Although most women carry cards, keys, cash, makeup, personal hygiene products, and so on, many women also tote dilapidated or broken objects that they shake their heads in disbelief over when discovered. Long lost items sometimes appear when a woman reviews the contents of her purse, and sometimes she discovers things that she did not even know existed.

The survivor, curator, and super-efficient homemaker become reflected in the handbag that they carry. These personae vary according to a woman's age, with the curator often found among older women. The survivalist is likely a professional woman, and the homemaker is often also a mother. Of course, all three of these types may be mothers, adding to the cargo of necessary items carried in the handbag. Thus, the handbag becomes a crash site where these female roles collide. Yet is it possible that "indispensables" are gradually becoming "inessentials"?

Although many women continue to carry handbags, perhaps we are in the throes of a transition where the purse is increasingly seen as a burden by younger generations. Perhaps these once-mandatory fashion accessories are presently disappearing into more unisex briefcases, book bags, diaper bags, glove compartments, or vanishing entirely into the pockets of jeans and jackets. Perhaps today's women feel self-sufficient and autonomous without carrying their houses on their shoulders in order to navigate the public sphere. Perhaps a woman's social and sexual independence is somehow linked with her independence from carrying a handbag.

Is the handbag a shackle of male oppression designed to maintain social order? Or is it a sign of complete self-sufficiency? In any case, women still require a place to carry keys, cards, cash, and items necessary for managing the body. Since "inelegant skirt pockets" inspired the carrying of a handbag, perhaps the entire issue rests upon the unfair allocation and size of pockets between men's and women's clothing. Aside from the "cargo" fashion movement, men's clothing hosts pockets of every description when compared to women's fashions. This is particularly true when women need to dress in formal clothing or maternity wear. Maybe a pregnant woman with pockets is too socially powerful for some, since an occupied womb is the ultimate pocket known to humankind. Whether pregnant or formal or both, many women find themselves relying upon the generosity of their multi-pocketed male partners to carry necessary items. Tiny clutch handbags or wallets-on-a-string designed as formal wear accessories simply do not have room for anything more substantial than a credit card or lip gloss.

Now as before, celebrities often set style trends into motion, and, today, most celebrities have added pagers, Palm Pilots, and cell phones to their list of indispensables. Rather than carrying a huge handbag, many celebrities such as Madonna and Melissa Joan Hart are opting for messenger bags or torso bags worn close to the body (Dam and Cojocaru, 1999). Actress Christina Ricci wears thigh-high boots with a custom made pocket for cards, cash, and keys because she "can go dancing all night long in them and be totally unencumbered" (Dam and Cojocaru, 1999). These women have discovered alternative ways to carry essentials while keeping their hands free.

The present day Western fashion industry revolves around a model where experts design fashions for transnational corporations, and collect money and prestige by

licensing their names to accessories instead of designing original clothing. This is especially true in the case of designer handbags. Most women cannot afford to outfit themselves in designer labels from head to toe, but many can afford to purchase a designer handbag with or without a showy label. These status bags, the to-die-for bags of the Birkin variety, have "labels and logos that translate into big money and instant prestige. Like a successful fragrance, an important trend bag is central to the image (and finances) of major fashion concerns. Women who want the status associated with designer fashion – without buying into the entire look – often just take the bag (Steele and Borelli, 1999: 10). There are also luxury bags that are "primarily distinguished by the quality of their materials and craftsmanship, and by the beauty of their design. It may no longer be chic to be a label snob, but many women are still attracted to sumptuous, expensive bags or those that aspire to the status of artworks" (Steele and Borelli, 1999: 11).

Many people today are mobile, and the issue of how to bring necessities along concerns men as well as women. In fact, manbags are a current trend in men's fashions, worn by men who are tired of cramming their pockets full of Palm pilots, keys, cell phones, and more (Gonzalez, 2002). An article in the *Globe and Mail* reports that perhaps manbags should be referred to as "shuttles" (January 7, 2003: A16). The term "shuttle" sounds more cosmopolitan and masculine than manbags, leaving behind any reference to a bag, and, therefore, to femininity, at least in terminology.

Then the *Globe and Mail's* "Style" section featured a witty article written by a writer who believed that the recent attempts by men to carry handbags have failed miserably. This writer first became aware that this "woman's issue" also plagues the

active urban male as a child reading Archie's Double Digest. Veronica had packed Archie's pockets with lipstick, liner, and so on, to the bulging point, and he would having difficulty sitting down during their date. Many men find themselves storing a companion's items that exceed a tiny handbag's carrying capacity in pants or suit coat pockets. Furthermore, men are realizing that modern day jeans offer little space for necessities such as a wallet, Blackberry, cell phone, and keys. Prototypes such as the large DJ bag of the mid-nineties, worn over the shoulder, proved unwieldy in pubs or clubs. Smaller bags followed.

The "hump," a one-square-foot fabric rectangle, rode between the shoulder blades on a circular strap, left cell phones inaccessible, so a holster then appeared on the front strap. In the writer's opinion: "Looking like a cross between a NASA jet pack and a marsupial pouch, the "hump" exemplifies the worst aspects of testosterone-driven invention: take something as practical and elegant as a purse, distort it terribly just so that it resembles nothing feminine, and slap on a bunch of freakish bulging pockets to satisfy the need to literally holster our gear" (*Globe and Mail,* August 2, 2003).

The appearance of the fanny pack signaled the end of any serious attempts by males to carry belongings. The positioning of the fanny pack directly above the genitals was "paging Dr. Freud," and drove the male author to reject bag carrying of any kind. But this bag-free choice creates another set of problems. Apparently: "A cell phone in a front pocket produces unbecoming tumescence, so it goes in a back pocket while walking. Keys must be kept in a separate pocket, so as not to scratch up the phone. This necessitates a weird dance whenever I sit down, as all pocket contents must be reconfigured to avoid grave ass injury" (*Globe and Mail,* August 2, 2003). He

pronounces his bag-free choice as a "microcontribution to the glory of the feminine, to the practicality of the purse," and he concludes "[l]ike Archie, I will soldier on into the summer nights, pockets seams taut, but shoulders – and fashion sense – unburdened" (*Globe and Mail*, August 2, 2003).

The issue of carrying necessary items seems to be fraught with difficulty whether one chooses to carry a bag or not. The above writer weighed the possibilities and made his choice to forego carrying a bag in favor of relying on pockets. He says that, while women "get the short end of the stick" when it comes to "gender equity," the purse represents "one feminine achievement" that has men "looking like chumps" (*Globe and Mail,* August 2, 2003). Apparently, women rule in the handbag sphere, and, therefore, handbags are feminine. Men, such as the above writer, wish to disassociate themselves from the feminine, and so choose to not carry even a "masculinized" version of a handbag. Women got it right with the handbag, but how does this help us achieve "gender equity," as the writer puts it?

Later, the *Globe and Mail* reported, "[t]he line between briefcase and purse is growing finer" (October 2, 2004). The variation in men's briefcases carried in the corridors of power is becoming more noticeable. Younger men are carrying smaller bags these days, about the size of a woman's handbag, and the bags are increasingly made out of shiny, rubbery materials. The bags have organizing compartments for a cell phone, Blackberry, I-Pod, and papers. On a cautionary note, the writer reports that these bags are only cool if they sport a shoulder strap. In contrast, the leather Europurse with the handle is not cool because it makes the man appear too "fastidious, fussy, maybe a little small" (*Globe and Mail*, October 2, 2004). The Cargo bag is made of hard material and has a

rounded top with a handle that makes it resemble a binocular case. For this writer, "[t]he most practical bag for the sensitive yet masculine downtowner is a briefcase in *soft* leather with a detachable shoulder strap, so that it can switch between lawyerly, when you carry it by the handle, and bohemian, as you swing it over your back for your bicycle ride home. It has a genteel, academic air" (*Globe and Mail*, October 2, 2004). These most recent designs for men's purses "promise a breakthrough into the fortress of masculinity" (*Globe and Mail*, October 2, 2004). Whether men or women choose to carry handbags or not, and the reasons why these choices are made, further problematizes the theoretical and practical significance of handbags.

The extent to which fashion shapes the Western identity varies in accordance with the particular framework of one's identity. Discretionary income and the framework of the fashion industry also play a part in choosing suitable everyday clothing and accessory items. Therefore, in order to gain understanding of the multiplicity of meanings that surround handbags in the Western world, an examination of the historical and theoretical underpinnings of fashion and the performance of modern identities become necessary. Analyzing handbags and identity performance produces new and interesting ways of reading both overt and hidden meanings of handbags as ordinary objects in cultural spaces with regard to identity, gender, class, aesthetics, self-presentation, autonomy, and vulnerability.

Chapter Three: Class, Gender, and the Handbag as a Social Marker

> *Of all the fashion accessories, the handbag presents the greatest opportunity to create a singular sculptural object. More than a hat, which must compete with the face, more than shoes, which must dance in pairs, the bag stands alone...speak[ing] for its owner in bold, decisive terms. No matter how messy or ill-defined its contents, a sleek handbag silhouette casts a powerful shadow (Johnson, 2002: 168).*
>
> *Fashion always implies the attribution of prestige and superiority to new models and by the same token entails a certain downgrading of the old order (Lipovetsky, 1994: 18).*

Right this way please. The doctor will be with you shortly.

Thank you. I see from the Yardley Jones caricature of you on the wall that you like handbags.

Oh yes, I have a closet full of handbags. I carry a new one every two weeks or so. And I also have all the matching wallets and cases that go inside too. I work here in this office during the day, but I also work part time at Holt Renfrew, which is necessary to support my handbag fetish. I love purses! And I get an employee discount at Holt's, so that helps. Yes, I love the designer bags. Louis Vuitton is my favorite, I have more than one of those. But I also buy Chanel, Gucci, and Prada. My life would be complete if I could just get my hands on a Hermes Birkin bag though! I'd kill to have one of those – they are so gorgeous, and everyone would see me carrying it. In Hawaii, where I'm originally from, Christian Dior bags are all the rage right now. I have to make sure that I buy a new gorgeous Christian Dior handbag before I go home for a visit. I have to show everyone how successful my life is here in Canada.

So, it's all about status then?

Of course! I hate it when I see another woman with a nicer bag than I have. I think, what's she got that I haven't got? She's no better than I am! I want to be the one

with the greatest bag! And that takes time and money, hence the part time job – I have to fund my addiction. I'm not going to let another woman think she's better than I am because she has a better handbag – no way!

Handbags represent one of the few remaining unexplored terrains of femininity. Casting a glance across time, handbags hold various items and project certain meanings throughout history. This chapter addresses the continuity of values and structures over time, particularly where handbags and femininity are concerned, and points out that the disruptions are equally as important as the continuities. Femininity, ephemerality, and the relationship of the handbag to the fashion industry are added to the contemporary and historical analysis of class and gender.

The Handbag and the History of Fashion

The mythical Diana carried a pouch for her game and her arrows, and the Delphic Oracles kept the substances they ultimately burned while entering a trance in bags tied to their wrists (Hagerty, 2002: 8). In fact, a drawstring pouch dangling from the wrist as early as the fifth century was the bag most consistently used by both women and men until the Middle Ages (Johnson, 2002: xix). During the Middle Ages, the female household manager of the medieval castle, the chatelaine, required a means of carrying her keys and domestic accounts. The solution was a decorative girdle hung around the waist to carry necessities, and these fashionable girdles were adopted by other women over time (Northern, 2001). At this time, large, ornate girdle-pouches worn astride the body, as well as big, bulky shoulder bags, implied a hard day's work and were for peasants only (Johnson, 2002: xxi). The leisurely lady of style carried an almoner, a tiny, showy coin purse designed for the public display of wealth. Family crests often adorned

the bags of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, announcing the court and title of the owner (Johnson, 2002: 270). The almoner, a coin purse for alms, seen on page 153, appeared during this era, and signals the appearance of the first evening bag (Johnson, 2002: 72). The cult of the small, ornate handbag for well-to-do women of style began with the almoner, and small bags have inferred class ever since (Johnson, 2002: xx; http://www.doctorbeer.com/joyce/emb/almpouch/almpouch.htm). It might be added that small, ornate handbags usually carried by well-off women are also a discretionary item signaling freedom from encumbrance.

The appearance of the handbag in social life coincides with the birth of fashion, which, in turn, coincides with the origin of the modern West. The development of the modern West, with cultural values of newness and the dignity of individuality and individual expression allowed the birth of fashion and the appearance of the handbag toward the end of the Middle Ages. During the Middle Ages, "the renewal of forms became a social value; fantasy deployed its artifices and its excesses in high society. With the birth of fashion, inconstancy in matters of form and ornamentation was no longer the exception but the lasting rule" (Lipovetsky, 1994: 15).

The appearance of fashion signaled a departure from the collective cohesiveness that ensured the strength and reproduction of customs often related to social classes, and signified the development of a new social bond based on temporality and ever-changing variations. In addition to the desire for something new and the glorification of the social present, the system of fashion originates from the "conjunction of two logical systems: the system of ephemeral and the system of aesthetic fantasy. This combination, which

formally defines the fashion mechanism, has been produced only once in history, at the threshold of our modern societies" (Lipovetsky, 1994: 25).

As women's skirts grew more voluminous during the sixteenth century, women stored valuables in skirt folds, in muffs, and even up their sleeves. As fashion styles continued to change into the seventeenth century, women outfitted themselves with pockets as a more efficient way to carry necessities. These pockets were not built-in like they were for men, but sewn onto a cloth band tied around the waist and hidden under full-skirted dresses (Northern, 2001).

A man's purse was considered fashionable in the sixteenth century, especially when worn suspended from a belt along with swords and daggers, and made more manly with detailed ornament (Johnson, 2002: 265). Over time, while women wore pretty pear-shaped pockets resting on each hip beneath hooped petticoats, men came to depend on sewn-in pockets that eliminated the need for a hanging purse or large fancy wallet, signaling a division of the sexes where the bag was concerned (Johnson, 2002: xxi). The separate pockets that women now fastened about their waists provided these women with the liberty of going about their business with their hands free.

During this time, wedding bags became popular, especially in Europe. Johnson elaborates:

> Newlyweds exchanged wedding bags, each cast with a porcelain portrait, one of the bride and one of the groom. As miniature symbolic dowries from both the man and the woman, these one-of-a-kind bags became an extension of their owners, a strange mix of material possession and sentimental attachment. A bag bearing a woman's face stuffed with coins was a powerful symbol of exchange and ownership, effectively saying, 'with this bag I thee wed.' Soft, round, and replete with bounty, wedding bags were modern good-luck charms with ancient meanings, the purse long represented receptive female genitals, and replaced the male codpiece (where once a man's money was stored) as a symbol of masculine power and material prestige (2002: 413-414).

Wedding bags were often the most ornamental of all bags, signifying the tradition of the purse as a symbol of female chattel and worldly wealth (Johnson, 2002: 262).

The eighteenth-century French Revolution ushered in a vogue for slim, high-waisted dresses, which exposed the large, pear-shaped bags filled with essentials such as prayer books, poems, knitting patterns, and ribbons (Northern, 2001). The contents of these bags were so precious that women would sometimes bequeath their pockets in their wills (Johnson, 2002: 267). When this sheer, empire-line dress fashion was introduced in Paris in 1790, women began to supplement their now inelegant under-the-skirt pockets "by carrying with them what they would call 'indispensables,' which would later be called handbags" (Winchester, 2001: 21). The indispensable was an accessory designed to hold items such a comb, a handkerchief, smelling salts, and visiting cards. Most women lived their lives in the domestic sphere and occasionally ventured out to church, the theatre, or other women's homes, places where they could survive quite nicely on the items contained in their handbag. This highlights another instance related to the issue of women and mobility: these women did not venture too far from home, so there was no need to carry a lot of household or personal items along.

Toward the end of the eighteenth century and into the start of the nineteenth century, the favorite novelty bag was the souvenir purse. Johnson states, "[a] silk reticule with hand-painted lithographs of the Parisian monuments or a box bag hand-enameled with Viennese streetscapes was a portable photo album that showed off a recent trip to the Continent" (2002: 414).

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the first handbags were sometimes referred to as "reticules," after the Latin reticulum, shown on page 154, and were

promptly mocked and renamed "ridicules" by the French press (Johnson, 2002: xxii). Previously associated with petticoats and knickers, reticules created a controversy among those who interpreted them as *underwear worn as outerwear*. Perhaps this is where the secrecy and Freudian style fear of women's "dark places" first emerged. The Empress Josephine was one of the first women to carry a reticule in the shape of a drooping blossom. Women at court and in the countryside quickly adopted the reticule. Soon women were crafting ornate bags of their own in the shape of seashells, circular fans, and even pineapples; the more elaborate the bag, the more status bestowed upon the owner. Women with time to fashion elaborate bags with embroidery and intricate beading by day had time to play, and more importantly to court, by night (Johnson, 2002: 75). These homemade bags served as chaste self-portraits of their owners.

By 1805, the scandal of women wearing underwear as outerwear died down, and the handbag was firmly established as a feminine accessory (Johnson, 2002: xxiii). According to Johnson, "[m]uch humor surrounded the birth of this great divide; as one wag quipped in the British *Imperial Weekly Gazette*, 'While men have their hands in their pockets so grand, ladies have pockets to wear in their hand'" (2002: xxiii).

At first, previously designed to be hidden underneath skirts, "[i]ndispensables were often made of silk and decorated with metal threads, ribbon, net, and gauze. All gorgeous and all completely unsuitable for the [outdoor] climate. By 1815, outdoor varieties had appeared, including one made of leather with a metal catch, flap, and handle. This was the first true leather handbag" (Northern, 2001). While today there are message t-shirts, in the early nineteenth century [1827] there was the message handbag. According to Johnson, "[s]ilk reticules displayed political affiliations and carried

pamphlets on emancipation and other pressing social and political issues of the day (Johnson, 2002: 273).

As the nineteenth century progressed, mass production and the hardened charms of professional beauties such as can-can dancers and royal mistresses introduced sexy materials to handbags. Clusters of ostrich feathers and rich red velvets were the blatantly erotic materials of the nineteenth century evening bag. What would Sigmund Freud have made of the Belle Epoque ostrich-trimmed opera bag with a tiny satin opening that gaped like a greedy mouth to reveal a circular mirror within? The image of the purse as a second sex began with the evening bag (Johnson, 2002: 76-77). Once again, we see the relationship between handbags and the Freudian-inspired secrecy and fear of women's private places.

By 1860, the leather handbag acquired a design based on luggage, a tote with sturdy handles like a miniature suitcase complete with a lock, key, and a ticket compartment (Johnson, 2002: xxiv). Johnson elaborates: "Unlike a flimsy mesh reticule or a decorative coin purse sealed by a string, the bag snapped shut, and for the first time women could carry their things with some degree of privacy. Increasingly practical, brilliantly structured bags supplanted men, who had long carried a lady's fan or her money, and they have been mystified and excluded by the bag ever since (2002: xxiv).

While men had abandoned the custom of carrying a "hand-bag" in favor of pockets sewn into jackets, vests, and pants, a process that would later vex men such as Flugel, women chose to forego the underwear pockets in favor of the handbag. Yet notions surrounding the intimacy and privacy of the underwear pocket carried through to

the handbag, along with the related fears and fascinations of a woman's secret, personal space.

The invention of the handbag facilitated female independence, for how a woman carried her belongings and displayed her wealth, or lack of wealth, related closely to how she carried herself. For instance, in the fourteenth century, a lady displayed her social position on her hip. In contrast, in the twenty first century, a woman's "wealth may be implied by the opulence of her bag but it is never truly revealed. The power of the handbag (and of a woman) dwells in solidity, secrecy, and graceful self-containment" (Johnson, 2002: xxv).

The five hundred years spanning from the mid-14th to the mid-19th centuries represents the inaugural phase of fashion where "the rhythm of ephemera and the reign of fantasy were established in a systematic and lasting way. Fashion revealed its characteristic social and aesthetic features even then, but for limited groups that monopolized the power of initiative and creation. This was the artisnal and aristocratic stage of fashion" (Lipovetsky, 1994: 17). During these 500 years, driven by the logic of fantasy and theatricality, men were as decorated as women, and the rhythms of change were less spectacular than they were during and after the Enlightenment era (Lipovetsky, 1994: 21).

Fashion, Handbags, and Femininity from the Mid-19th Century to the Mid-20th Century

Fashion as we understand it today emerged during the latter half of the nineteenth century, and by the beginning of the twentieth century, haute couture had adopted the now familiar rhythm of creation and presentation (Lipovetsky, 1994: 55-58). An unprecedented system of production and diffusion emerged during this time and, together

with technological progress and continuous stylistic creations and reversals, created and maintained an identifiable fashion system. This particular organization of fashion lasted for one hundred years, from the mid-nineteenth century to the "point in the 1960s when the system began to crack and to transform itself to some extent" (Lipovetsky, 1994: 55).

With the "great renunciation" of the nineteenth century, the masculine mode was eclipsed by the feminine, and fashion and accessories were deemed a feminine endeavor. Lipovetsky states: "[f]rom that point on, the new canons of male elegance, discretion, and sobriety, the rejection of color and ornamentation, made fashion and its artifices a female perogative" (1994: 27). Furthermore, "[t]he neutral austere, sober masculine costume reflected the consecration of egalitarian ideology and the conquering bourgeois ethic of thrift, merit, and work. Costly aristocratic dress, a sign of celebration and pomp, was replaced by clothing that expressed the new social values of equality, economy, and effort" (Lipovetsky, 1994: 74). Fashion became exclusive to the universe of women, creating obvious inequality in the way the sexes presented themselves. How is the great renunciation related to the post Industrial Revolution notions of women as nurturers, cultural/national symbols, and men's counterparts?

While men became excluded from the glorification of fashion and artifice, women became destined to introduce and reintroduce symbols of luxury, seduction, and frivolity. Veblen called this new allocation of appearances "vicarious consumption," a way of continuing through women to display male wealth and social status (Lipovetsky, 1994: 74). However, as Lipovetsky argues, to explain this new distribution of appearances simply in terms of vicarious consumption is to "underestimate the weight of the cultural

and aesthetic representations that have been attached for millennia to the position of the feminine" (1994: 74). He states:

> Whatever role may be played here by ostentatious class spending, women's monopolization of artifice can only be understood in relation to the collective representation of the 'fair sex' as destined to please and seduce by its physical attributes and by the play of the factitious.... By putting women's fashion on a pedestal, by reaffirming the primordial requirement of feminine beauty, the hundred years' fashion represented a continuation of the representations, values, and predilections of the feminine that had ruled for centuries (Lipovetsky, 1994: 74).

In contrast to Lipovetsky, Joan Jacobs Brumberg notes important differences between earlier times and the present day in terms of young American women and cultural aesthetic ideals. Nineteenth century ideals focused on "good works," whereas twentieth century ideals emphasize "good looks." Brumberg states that "[b]eauty imperatives for girls in the nineteenth century were kept in check by consideration of moral character and by culturally mandated patterns of emotional denial and repression" (Brumberg, 1997: xx). She maintains:

> Nineteenth-century girls often noted in their diaries when they acquired an exciting personal embellishment, such as a hair ribbon or a new dress, but these were not linked to self-worth or personhood in quite the ways they are today. In fact, girls who were preoccupied with their looks were likely to be accused of vanity or self-indulgence. Many parents tried to limit their daughters' interest in superficial things, such as hairdos, dresses, or the size of their waists, because character was considered more important than beauty by both parents and the community. And character was built on attention to self-control, service to others, and belief in God – not on attention to one's own, highly individualistic body project (Brumberg, 1997: xx).

Whether beauty ideals were of primary significant in a woman's life or not, with fashion, we began observing each other, evaluating each other's looks, and appreciating nuances of color, cut, and style in dress and accessories. Fashion allows for the appreciation of the spectacle provided by others, but it also inaugurated an unprecedented

investment of the self, an aesthetic self-observation. Fashion is associated with the "pleasure of seeing, but also with the pleasure of being seen, of exhibiting oneself to the gaze of others" (1994: 29).

Fashion is also associated with narcissism. Lipovetsky states:

> While fashion quite obviously does not create narcissism out of whole cloth, it does reproduce narcissism in a particularly noteworthy way: it makes narcissism a constitutive and permanent structure of fashionable individuals, by encouraging them to pay more attention to the way they present and represent themselves, by inciting them to seek elegance, grace, and originality (1994: 29).

In this way, "the endless variations of fashion and the code of elegance invite individuals to study themselves, to adapt novelties for their own use, to concern themselves with their own dress" (Lipovetsky, 1994: 29).

Fashion involves self and social representation, and is an original system for social regulation and social pressure. It allows one to display membership in a given rank, class, nation, religion, or subculture. For Lipovetsky, "[t]he diffusion of fashion has been less a form of social constraint than an investment of social representation and affirmation, less a type of collective control than a sign of social pretension" (1994: 30). It is here that Pierre Bourdieu might enter back into the discussion. In *Distinction* (1984), Bourdieu suggests that there is a socially recognized hierarchy of the arts, and within each of the arts, genres, certain time periods, schools of thought, and so on, there is a corresponding social hierarchy of consumers. For Bourdieu, this predisposes tastes to function as markers of class. Furthermore, the significance or importance of the way culture has been acquired can only be appreciated by onlookers who understand and are *able to decipher* the cultural code of the work of the art, or the handbag. One must be in possession of the cultural competence required to decipher the code in order for the art or

object to have meaning and interest. As mentioned earlier, Baudrillard argued for the importance of this sign exchange process, and I agree with him on this point. He stated that it is the "sign exchange value which is fundamental – use value is often no more than a practical guarantee (or even a rationalization pure and simple)," and this is certainly the case with designer handbags. The meanings of an outrageously expensive handbag simply have little impact on those who cannot decipher the code.

Modern fashion was articulated around two seemingly unrelated industries: haute couture with luxurious items and made-to-order designs, and industrial clothing manufacture with inexpensively mass-produced, off-the-rack items that often imitated the luxury of haute couture (Lipovetsky, 1994: 55-56). This bipolar system paralleled a society that was divided into classes with quite distinct lifestyles and aspirations. Interestingly, "[i]ndustrial manufacturing came before haute couture. Starting in the 1820s in France, following England's example, an industry for producing new, inexpensive, ready-to-wear clothing was established; it was flourishing by 1840, even before the age of mechanization inaugurated around 1860 with the advent of the sewing machine" (Lipovetsky, 1994: 57). Furthermore, "[a]s department stores gained a foothold, as technology progressed and production costs were lowered, manufacturers diversified the quality of the goods they offered the lower and middle bourgeoisie. After the First World War, manufacturing was profoundly transformed under the influence of an increased division of labor, improving machinery, breakthroughs in the chemical industry allowing richer colors, and – as of 1939 – new textiles based on synthetic fibers" (Lipovetsky, 1994: 57). The revolution in packaging underway at this time produced

miniature tubes and bottles that easily fit into handbags, turning some women into "packrats."

In addition to this bipolar system, there have always been intermediate organizations, low-level and middle-level couture, between the two poles. In France in particular, during the period in question large numbers of women (60 percent in the 1950s) continued to use dressmakers or made their own clothes from patterns sold in stores or through fashion magazines (Lipovetsky, 1994: 56).

The issue of women and mobility is especially pertinent here, since, in the United States for example, most women went to work in the factories during WWII while the men and other women were fighting overseas. Women threw a backpack on before jumping on a bicycle to pedal to work. Cumbersome handbags became unpopular for these working women, since they were impractical and even dangerous to carry while riding a bike. When the war was over and the men returned home to claim their jobs, most women were fired from their factory jobs, and eventually retreated to the suburbs under the guise of "homeland security." Americans were traumatized by the havoc wreaked by WWII, and obtaining security and peacefulness in life rose to the nation's forefront. Women became national and cultural symbols of warmth and nurturing. New kitchen appliances were designed to make a "woman's work" of serving as a wife and mother much easier (or so the state-sponsored advertisements claimed) in the new, sought-after suburban home. People were fond of saying things like, "as American as mom and apple pie." Programs appearing on the newly-invented television screens included heartwarming shows such as *Leave it to Beaver*, featuring, of course, a warm, nurturing wife and mother who could be counted on to take care of everyone (except,

perhaps, herself). A woman's identity became synonymous with a nurturing home, a safe haven for the children and from the ravages of a man's workplace. A woman does not require a handbag around the house, but she did need one when driving her children around in the new station wagon, and the handbag enjoyed a resurgence of popularity. As time went on, and the former Rosie the Riveter became disgruntled with her new lot in life of cooking, cleaning, and bearing the nation's future soldiers, or the children simply grew up and left home, or she became "shamefully" divorced (because she wasn't woman enough to hang on to her man), she began to venture back into the paid workforce. Previous training in the role of nurturer, however, prompted many women to buy large handbags that could hold "everything but the kitchen sink." Handbags grew larger and larger to accommodate the working woman's "home away from home" so she could carry "her life in her handbag." Working women were interested in function; well-to-do women were generally interested in fashion, as Bourdieu suggested. As noted above, the fashion system driven by haute couture that emerged in the mid-nineteenth century and lasted until the 1960s was essentially synonymous with feminine fashion, thereby overshadowing the slower, steadier masculine fashion of the time. The emergence of the handbag as a fetish began long ago, with the appearance of haute couture.

The Emergence of Haute Couture

The grandfather of haute couture, Charles Frederic Worth, was the first to set up a fashion house in Paris on the rue de la Paix in the winter of 1857-58 (Lipovetsky, 1994: 57). Worth's was first in the line of women's fashion houses that eventually came to be known as haute couture houses. A mere two years later, Worth received the title "Furnisher of the Court Representatives" of almost all royal families of Europe. In fact,

the wife of Alexander III, Maria Feodorovna, commissioned her dresses in the fashion house of Worth for more than 30 years. She placed so much confidence in Charles Worth that she sent orders for dresses by telegram, the fabrics and the style to be decided by the master (http://www.hermitagemuseum.org/html_En/04/b2003/hm4_1y.html)

Organized fashion shows began in 1908, and, with these spectacles that were held at a fixed hour of the afternoon in the great fashion salons of Paris, renewal in fashion was for the first time institutionalized and orchestrated (Lipovetsky, 1994: 58). Each season brought a new look to aspire to. However, according to Lipovetsky:

> Aside from offering ready-to-wear items, Worth's real originality – to which contemporary fashion is still heir – lay in the fact that for the first time brand-new models, prepared in advance and changed frequently, were presented to clients in luxurious salons, then made to measure according to the client's choice. This revolution in the process of creating fashion was accompanied...by a major innovation in sales technique that was also initiated by Worth: the models were worn and presented by young women, prototypes of today's mannequins or fashion models, known then as *sosies*, 'doubles' (Lipovetsky, 1994: 57).

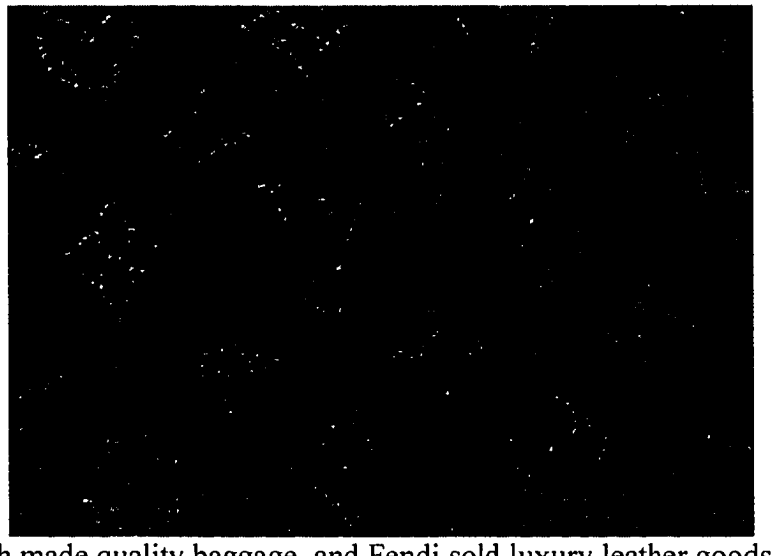
In fact, "Worth's move marked the end of fashion's traditional era and the beginning of its modern artistic phase, for Worth was the first to introduce constant change in forms, fabrics, and accessories. It was he who disrupted the uniformity of style to a degree that shocked public taste; it was he who dethroned crinolines and could thus be credited with starting a fashion 'revolution'" (Lipovetsky, 1994: 64). Importantly, Worth allowed a new vocation together with a new social status for the dressmaker. After enduring centuries of relegation to subordinate status, the couturier had become a modern artistic genius, whose commanding law was innovation (Lipovetsky, 1994: 64). Couturiers signed their works, like painters, and they were protected by law (Lipovetsky, 1994: 66).

Following Worth's outrageously successful example:

> In France, dozens of fashion houses sprang up following Worth's example and organized along similar lines. The 1900 World's Fair included twenty houses of haute couture, including Worth, Rouff (established in 1884), Paquin (1891), and Callot Soeurs (1896). Doucet, which later hired Poiret, opened its doors in 1880; Lanvin was founded in 1909, Chanel and Patou in 1919. The decorative arts show welcomed seventy-two fashion houses; in 1959, some fifty were registered with the Chambre Syndicale de la Couture parisienne (Lipovetsky, 1994: 57).

The luxury industry led by haute couture expanded to occupy a major role in Western economies, catering to those who could afford to purchase their creations.

Following the patterns and social values involved with the birth of fashion, the idea of an important handbag, a bag that signifies status and prestige, began in the nineteenth century but was perfected during the twentieth century. According to Anna Johnson, "[t]he classic bag began with the horse and the steamship. Louis Vuitton made travelling trunks for Napoleon III, and Hermes were saddlers to the aristocracy. Prada



and Gucci both made quality baggage, and Fendi sold luxury leather goods and furs" (Johnson, 2002: 2).

Louis Vuitton invented both the timelessly popular monogram logo, seen above, and the first sturdy travel canvas bag. "The steamer bag of 1901 and the Keep-all, designed in 1924, formed the blueprint for almost all totes, career bags, and travel bags to

follow. Tall, with a front flap and tidy belt, the steamer shares its long lines and masculine charm with the later Hermes Birkin bag. Its tiny handle was designed to hang on the back of a cabin door. Neatly horizontal, we look at the Keep-all today as a classic tennis bag or duffel" (Johnson, 2002: 6). The "Noe," Vuitton's bucket-shaped shoulder bag, was initially designed in 1932 to carry five bottles of champagne, allowing one to travel with style (Johnson, 2002: 5). The Noe "epitomized Vuitton's philosophy of travel: elegance can and will be taken on the road" (Johnson, 2002: 15).

By making the leap from the horse to the automobile, Hermes created the four distinctive handbag shapes that continue to form the basic design of classic handbags today. The "Haut a Courroies," with its tall shape and lengthy straps was originally created in 1892 to hold a saddle. By 1930, the bag had been changed to accommodate travelers, and by 1956, it was madly popular courtesy of Princess Grace (Johnson, 2002: 4).

Emile-Maurice Hermes used the Canadian army cargo zipper on the "Bolide" bag, the first bag to sport a zipper, when he designed a new driving bag for his wife in 1923 (Johnson, 2002: 4). In 1930, Hermes designed the "Plume" which was a more modern version of a horse blanket bag, and became the first bag that could double as a day bag and an overnight bag (Johnson, 2002: 4). This simple travel design "spearheaded the minimal modernist handbag" (Johnson, 2002: 15). The "Trim," designed in 1958, was made famous by Jackie Onassis after she sore hers around Capri in the late 1960s, making it a resort standard; few know that this design was based on a feed bag (Johnson, 2002: 4, 15). "The shapes of these four bags seem outrageously simple: an elongated

triangle, an elliptical square, a soft little box shaped like a caramel, and a simple hobo. Yet these are the forms that most classic bags are based on today" (Johnson, 2002: 5).

Joan Jacobs Brumberg points out that a new ideal of feminine beauty evolved around the turn of the twentieth century, dubbed "the century of svelte" (Brumberg, 1997: 99). She explains:

> In 1908, Paul Poiret, a Parisian designer, introduced the new silhouette that replaced the voluptuous Victorian hourglass, with its tiny waist and exaggerated hips. Instead, Poiret's dresses shifted visual interest to the legs. The new, fashionable figure was slender, long-limbed, and relatively flat-chested. American women of all ages donned the short, popular chemise dress that was the uniform of the "flapper" in the 1920s. As they did so, they bade farewell to corsets, stays, and petticoats, and they began to diet, or internalize control of the body (Brumberg, 1997: 99-100).

As Lipovetsky points out, it is difficult to ignore the influence of modern artistic trends on the democratic transformation of fashion following the First World War (1994: 62). From the inter-war period onward, it became chic not to appear wealthy, and ornateness was eclipsed by a new aesthetic. He continues on to say, "[w]hile the first revolution instituting the look of the modern woman can be traced to Poiret's suppression of the corset in 1909-10, the second and unquestionably more radical one arrived in the 1920s under the impetus of Chanel and Patou" (1994: 60).

In contrast to the earlier feminine voluminousness and roundness, "[t]he straight, flat-chested figure of the 1920s woman harmonizes perfectly with the cubist pictoral space comprising planes and angles, vertical and horizontal lines geometrical contours and flattenings; it echoes Leger's tubular universe, the stylistic austerity introduced by Picasso, Braque, and Matisse in the wake of Manet and Cezanne (Lipovetsky, 1994: 62). Indeed, "[f]ashion learned a lesson from the modernist project that began with Manet, a project characterized, according to Georges Bataille, by the 'negation of eloquence,' by

the rejection of 'grandiloquent verbiage,' and by the majesty of images'" (Lipovetsky, 1994: 63).

Meanwhile, As fashion was centralized and internationalized, it was also democratized (Lipovetsky, 1994: 59). Lipovetsky states:

> The rise of industrial dressmaking on the one hand and of mass communications on the other, the dynamics of modern life-styles and values, led not only to the disappearance of diverse regional folk costumes but also to the attenuation of heterogeneous class differences in dress: dressing in the fashion of the day became possible for an increasingly broad spectrum.... The most remarkable thing about this whole process is the contribution made by haute couture – a luxury industry par excellence – to the democratization of fashion. From the 1920s on, with the simplification of women's clothing that was symbolized in a way, by Chanel, fashion indeed became less inaccessible because it was easier to imitate: the gap between dress styles inevitably narrowed (1994: 59).

Therefore, the gap between women's fashions became wider, since "[o]n the one hand, there were daytime fashions for city and sports, governed by discretion, comfort, and functionality. On the other hand, there were enchanting evening fashions designed to bring out the seductiveness of femininity" (Lipovetsky, 1994: 61). In this way, women's fashions became less homogenous and more varied with the democratization of fashion.

Sportswear inspired a new cultural aesthetic evolution in the feminine appearance in response to a new idealization of sports. Sports and sportswear brought the prototype of the slim, sleek, modern woman who plays tennis and golf instead of remaining inactive beneath ruffles and lace. The sportswear revolution began in 1890, when the cardigan sweater came into fashion through the game of golf. Bouffant pants also came into vogue for cyclists at this time. In 1900, sleeveless bathing suits were introduced for women. By the 1920s, there were one-piece bathing suits that bared both arms and legs. The idea of bare legs inspired shorter skirt lengths for skating, hockey, and tennis. In the 1930s, two-piece bathing suits left backs exposed, as well as arms and legs, and by 1940, the bikini

was all the rage. The amount of time spent golfing, cycling, and playing tennis increased after the Second World War, and by the 1960s, the social value of physical comfort combined with modern, futuristic lines was dubbed the "Courreges effect," after the designer of the same name (Lipovetsky, 1994: 61-62).

Along with the democratization of fashion came what became known as "knock-offs." Cheaper varieties of expensive clothing and handbags appeared on the market, making style and the appearance of status more accessible to people other than the wealthy.

As with clothing fashions, distinctions between the functionality and fetishism of handbags become clearer as well. While clothing was democratized during the nineteenth century as middle class styles moved within the reach of working class people, only certain people and certain fashions were involved in the process. For example, accessories such as handbags marked class boundaries, and many working class housewives spent the household clothing budget on their husbands and marriageable daughters rather than on new fashions for themselves (Crane, 2000; Bourdieu, 1984: 378).

By the early twentieth century, the minimalist design of evening bags liberated by carrying less, and, in the 1920s, cigarettes and rouge created the shape of the tango purse. Like the dresses of the era, deco metal mesh bags left little room for concealment, especially with tiny bags designed to be suspended from one finger (Johnson, 2002: 77). Novelty bags abounded in these days of shorter skirts and wilder times, and flappers were known to carry their party essentials in a "porcelain doll bag whose ruffled skirts

concealed a silky interior or to use a little fur dog as a cigarette case" (Johnson, 2002: 414).

However, the golden age of the novelty bag came in the 1930s. The decade that produced screwball comedy, tap dancing, Bakelite, and Surrealism inspired quirky bags. Created for an intellectual elite, Elsa Schiaparelli's birdcage bag and folded newspaper bag brought on a strong desire for trendy, figural bags. Suddenly everyone wanted a bag modeled after the shape of something utterly modern and zany (Johnson, 2002: 415). The connections between Schiaparelli and the surrealists were very strong. For example, she designed the headdress for Salvador Dali's mannequin at the 1938 International Surrealist Exhibition in Paris.

Designer Sonia Delaunay melded art into fashion by constructing the first "simultaneous dress" and soon created Dadaist and Surrealist handbags to match (Morano, 1986: 21). Between the two world wars, Surrealists carved up handbags and used them for collages and sculptures (Johnson, 2002: xiv; Honour and Fleming, 2000: 801-816). Wartime did not dim the passion for bizarre bags, "especially as Surrealist dreams filtered into magazine illustrations and department store windows. The profusion of clock motifs on bags was probably triggered by Dali's melting watch, and Anne Marie's opera bag shaped like a mandolin suggests Magritte's famous pipe" (Johnson, 2002: 415).

After the Second World War, when leather was scarce, Gucci "turned to cotton canvas and bamboo handles. Chanel whipped the weighted gilt chains out of the hems of her suits and fashioned them into the shoulder straps of her famous quilted 2/1955 bag" (Johnson, 2002: 3). Later, blue jeans became "the student uniform of '60s campus chic,

and bag manufacturers went after the teen market with a zip-front pocket that could be a bookbag or a gym bag" (Johnson, 2002: 392). Karl Lagerfield later modified Chanel's classic square, quilted handbag, and it went on to eclipse the "Kelly," *the* status bag during the 1980s (Johnson, 2002: 7). The medieval tradition of a family crest ennobling the front of a bag as a status symbol was revived in the 1980s by the aggressive initials of designer logos. The gigantic interlocking Cs cast in gold on the front of a Chanel bag inspired many designers to up the ante and make their names the predominant feature of a bag, enabling women to boldly carry status on their shoulders (Johnson, 2002: 259). Johnson elaborates that Lagerfield's success prompted "many old houses to revive their best iconic features and fine-tune them into handbags, especially after overlicensing in the '70s had diluted their names by spreading logos far and wide. The return to classic style in the late '80s and early '90s signaled serious recovery of both prestige and revenue for the big design houses" (Johnson, 2002: 8).

Meanwhile, "Miuccia Prada took the somewhat fusty old-world elegance of her grandfather's Milanese leather house and used the name, rather than the house style, to forge her first cult bag. Her radical departure into luxury sportswear style inverted the status system. By making the bag simple (a black, ripstop nylon backpack) and the logo subtle but luxe, she gave the designer logo renewed street credibility" (Johnson, 2002: 8).

Johnson points out that ultimately classic handbags "provoke demonic levels of desire. The rationale for spending seven hundred to seven thousand dollars on a mere handbag can't be rational; aside from the sober investment in quality, history and elegance, we are drawn to something far more provocative than that. Luxury is

aggression dressed as fashion, the crest that divides you from the crowd and makes your power explicit" (2002: 10-11). For Johnson:

> Magic, mystery, and money are all wrapped up in the myth of a classic handbag. We wear them to look more powerful, composed, or posh than we really are. Designers play on such aspirations, aware that women are searching for their personal motto and fictional selves. As a feminine trophy for succeeding in a man's world or a fragment of a life that is perpetually beyond your reach, the classic bag remains a stubborn, bewitching fixture. Call it handbag utopia (2002: 11).

Coco Chanel once described luxury as "the necessity where necessity ends" (Johnson, 2002: 21). Chanel pointed out that, for some women:

> The ideal handbag, like a beautiful shoe, has never really been about necessity. It is the stuff of dreams, desire, and deliverance from the banal. It is that house in the country we can't afford embodied in Italian straw, it is a first kiss in cherry-red velvet, a movie star flash of rhinestones or a crush of glossy patent leather from Paris, France. A portable fashion object unperturbed by the changes of the body or the heavy hand of age, the bag is infinitely optimistic. We carry it, and it transports us into the lives we wish we were living (Johnson, 2002: xviii).

Unperturbed by time or age and able to provide a certain fulfillment of desires for status and prestige, the handbag might present an outlet for some women within the confines of certain limitations. One of the most famous designers of all time, Chanel's bags are legendary. Chanel's handbags and the fantasy and the desire for self-transformation that they inspire often begin with the endorsement of a princess or a movie star, or other such noteworthy personalities.

The evening bag, forever linked with flirtation, sexiness, and artifice, can be tiny enough to carry on one finger as long as it can hold a lipstick. Designed to display status, wealth, and sex appeal, the evening bag is created solely for glamour and its disregard for practical concerns. The tiny evening bag, "displays the inverse snobbery of not how much one can carry, but how little. Anything more than a teacup-sized reticule implied a

lack of a servant two centuries ago, the lack of a male escort one century ago, and the lack of a credit card in this one" (Johnson, 2002: 75).

It appears that social change is often announced by a radical transformation in the design and shape of objects, particularly everyday objects. According to Johnson, "[i]n the case of bags, the stripping of ornament, the swelling of the belly, or the sprouting of oversized handles were always signs of the times. War makes bags bigger, boom times make them smaller. Modern art has made them simpler, and feminism has given them functionality, compartments, and sturdy fittings" (2002: 169).

As Steele and Borelli (1999) point out, each era hosts an "it" bag, the single accessory that defined the time. Often bags were catapulted to "it" status by the celebrities who carried them. As mentioned earlier, in the 1950s, it was Grace Kelly's bag that was it. In the 1960s, it was Paco Rabanne's metallic paillette shoulder bag, designed to literally swing. The monogrammed status handbag made a come back in the 1970s, with Gucci and Fendi sporting caramel and chocolate logos and brassy insignia. In the 1980s, the flashy Chanel bag and the sensible Prada backpack shared the crown of it" However, the 1990s saw the battle for it intensify to the point where a new bag was hailed each season as the One. For example, in 1996 it was the Kate Spade tote; in 1998 it was the Fendi baguette and the Chanel 2005. In 1999, the Prada bowling bag and the Vuitton Vernis leather baby pack were it. In 2000, the Louis Vuitton 'graffiti' pochette reigned; and in 2001 the Sonia Rykiel Domino, the John Galliano Trailer for Dior, the Hermes Birkin, and the Balenciaga Saddle were all it. Interestingly, in the quest for power and glory, "the handbag has become almost physically aggressive: a long Gaultier clutch that looks a bit like a night stick, a Moschino evening bag in military canvas.

Perhaps the uncertainty of a new century compels women to literally get a grip onto fashion's strongest symbol of security – the handbag" (Johnson, 2002: 481). From the tiny hand-held jewel to the trendy "it" bag, the handbag is a woman's most essential accessory, the ultimate status symbol, and the quintessential fashion statement. If head-to-toe designer wear is out of the question due to insufficient finances, then a classic, trendy, or bejeweled bag might be the answer. Handbags make it possible to indulge in luxurious designer products without spending thousands of dollars on a single outfit. "These visible icons of style speak volumes about one's personal approach to fashion" (Steele and Borelli, 1999).

However, as Bourdieu and others pointed out, one must understand the significance of the handbags that are all the rage, or the intended impact is lost.

According to Steele and Borelli, "[i]f we analyze handbag mania in terms of fashion trends, the answer can be summed up in the word 'money.'" There is money to be made in bags, especially those regarded as status symbols" (1999: 8). There is money to be made in knock-offs as well. According to the New York Times (June 4, 2004), approximately 17 men were arrested in a "sting" to catch replica handbag smugglers. Huge shipping containers were loaded with fake Louis Vuittons, Cartiers, and Gucci handbags assembled in China, and destined for New York City via New Jersey ports. Corrupt customs officials apparently received $50,000 for each shipment in this multi-million dollar underworld industry.

In analyzing the wider social panorama, it also becomes clear that handbags play a significant role in women's changing lives. Steele and Borelli elaborate:

> Women tend to carry a lot around with them, because their bags serve so many practical purposes – as an office away from the desk, a portable dressing table, a

> survival kit. But bags are not purely functional, either. On the individual level, the bag is a psychologically and aesthetically significant object, an artwork in which we 'carry our neuroses.' Modern women have increasingly assumed new roles, while also retaining many of their traditional aspirations. As a result, they use different kinds of bags for a variety of different purposes (1999: 8).

The one hundred years spanning from the mid-nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century saw fashion become a social imperative, and the code of personality and originality gained precedence. This era brought divergent manners of dress closer together with the democratization of fashion, the democratization of the movie stars' images, and the creation of haute couture and mass-market objects of desire; however, it also took them farther apart as a result of the cult of individualism where personal flair and expression were valued. Similar to fashion trends, classic, novelty, and "it" handbags were introduced each season, immediately rendering earlier styles out-of-date.

Since the 1960s, cultural and social transformations have disrupted, but not entirely forgotten, earlier stylistic trends. The emergence of youth culture and its desire to shock, or at least signify daring and originality, brought its own fashion revolution spurred on by ready-to-wear clothing beyond the reach of haute couture. Blue jeans appeared on the fashion scene, exemplifying new and cherished values of contemporary style and individualism. With blue jeans, everyone looked like everyone else, and it became more difficult to tell male from female, lower-class from mid- or upper-class, and the democratic individualist appearance gained a stronger foothold in society. As Diana Vreeland states: "Blue jeans are the most beautiful things since the gondola" (http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/d/dianavreel112529.html)

In 1963, Mary Quant created the Ginger Group in London and the mini-skirt quickly made its appearance, defying earlier class-oriented fashion logic and glorifying novelty and youth. This fashion revolution was linked to the baby boom and the

increasing buying power of the young, but also to inconspicuous consumption. These individualist, non-conforming styles reflected new social values featuring movie stars, rock stars, and other such youthful idols.

In spite of all these changes in fashion and accessories over the past century and a half, while social identity through clothing has been blurred, sexual identity by way of fashion remains somewhat obvious. Lipovetsky states, "...men and women alike wear pants, but the cuts and often the colors are different; shoes have nothing in common; a woman's shirt is easy to tell from a man's; the shapes of bathing suits differ, and so do those of underwear, belts, pocketbooks, watches, and umbrellas" (1994: 109). While there are small markers that serve to identify gender, there are more obvious markers that are designed to designate gender "via exclusively feminine markers such as dresses, skirts, women's suits, stockings, pumps, makeup, depilatories, and so on" (Lipovetsky, 1994: 110). Handbags may also be added to this list of identifiable feminine markers. Most importantly, dresses, skirts, and makeup remain exclusively in the feminine domain, they are strictly forbidden to men with the exception of men who dress in drag. While women can wear virtually anything they want to, including clothes of masculine origin, men must adhere to a more restrictive code based on the absence of feminine symbols, and under no circumstances may men wear dresses or skirts, or use makeup, except, of course, if they are cross-dressers. In summary, "[t]he inegalitarian logic of fashion remains the rule: the boyish look for women has gained social recognition, but unless men are willing to risk laughter and scorn, they cannot adopt the emblems of femininity" (1994: 111). Handbags remain firmly entrenched as an emblem of femininity. Why is this so? Lipovetsky answers:

> In the West, dresses have been identified with women for six hundred years; this age-old factor is not without effect. If dresses are off-limits to men, this is because dresses are culturally associated with femininity and thus, for us, with fashion, whereas since the nineteenth century masculinity has been defined, at least in part, in contradistinction to fashion, to the ephemeral and the superficial. For men to adopt feminine symbols in dress would be to transgress, in the realm of appearance the very essence of modern masculine identity (1994: 111).

Of course, the same might be said in the case of handbags, feminine emblems that remain off-limits to men wishing to appear masculine. It is for this reason that cross-dressers often carry handbags when they wish to appear more feminine.

For women, "haute couture unleashed an original process within the fashion order: it psychologized fashion by creating designs that gave concrete form to emotions, personality, and character traits" (Lipovetsky, 1994: 79). In fact, "depending on her clothes, a woman could appear melancholy, casual, sophisticated, severe, insolent, ingenuous, whimsical, romantic, gay, young, amusing, or athletic; furthermore, the fashion magazines chose to stress these psychological essences and their original combinations" (Lipovetsky, 1994: 79). Most importantly:

> Wardrobe renewals are governed increasingly not only by personal taste, but also by the desire to 'create a new you'. Many women make no bones about it: they do not buy a given article of clothing because it is in fashion, or because they need it, but because they need a lift, because they are depressed and want to change their mood.... By going to the hairdresser or buying something to wear they feel they are 'doing something', becoming different, growing younger, getting off to a fresh start. 'Make me over': as fashion ceases to be a directive and uniform phenomenon, the purchase of fashion items is not governed by social and aesthetic considerations alone; it has become a therapeutic phenomenon as well (Lipovetsky, 1994: 126).

Seeking thrills or therapy, many women purchase handbags as outward expressions of themselves, displaying certain impressions that they wish to create of themselves to the public. Handbags are useful objects for impression management and for identity performance while travelling across town or across the globe.

Chapter Four: Performing Identity, Crossing the Border, and the Private Universe of the Purse

> *The purse is "the archetypal symbol for the fertile womb, the shape, the darkness, the secrecy ... all that is hidden away" – Carl Jung*
>
> *Femininity and masculinity are but imitations of an imitation with no original.* (Campbell and Harbord, 1999: 230).
>
> *Fashion, even anti-fashion, is forever. It's the only way we can become the characters we wish to be – Christian Lacroix* (Johnson, 2002: 166).

Okay, take a deep breath, relax, and put on just a little more lipgloss. Oh no, where did I put my new Louis Vuitton handbag? I need that bag tonight! It has just the right amount of panache for this concert, and I bought an entire designer outfit just to match the bag! Where did I put it? I could use the Chanel bag, but it just doesn't say quite what I want to say to the other people that will be in the box with us at Rexall Place tonight. Powerful women don't really fit in with this crowd. I must appear to be perfect in every way. My husband is the most successful partner in the firm, and, since he is considerably older than I am, and I am his second wife, I have a big part to play. I must admit, I do look stunning. This jacket and skirt are smashing, and these are such great boots! And I thought I'd die with happiness when I found out that everything perfectly matched the gorgeous new LV bag! What a coup! Well, things would be perfect if I could just find my LV bag – this great outfit just isn't the same without the grand finishing touch!

Okay, now let's rehearse the names and statuses of the lawyers from the other firms. I can't remember if John is bringing his wife tonight. I really hope not, she's such a complete bore, and she has no sense of style at all. And it doesn't even matter to me what Frank's wife will be wearing, she's so fat. Nothing and no one can top my outfit! There's no way any of the other wives are going to be better than me!

Thank goodness I found my precious LV bag – now I can relax. I will be able to enjoy the full impact that I will have when I enter the box seating area perfectly made up and dressed to kill on my incredibly wealthy husband's arm. Oh what a sight we will be! I wonder which Porsche we will take tonight?

Here we go! What's this? Why is everyone else wearing blue jeans?! Even though this is a concert given by some hick town Canadian band, can't these people put a little bit more effort into their appearance? They all look so blah – no competition at all – I win hands down. I can't believe this, everyone else in this box is in jeans. I wonder if I look a little out of place.... Oh well, no worries, I look fabulous, and everyone knows it. I'll just lift up my LV bag a little higher, just in case someone missed it. Wow, these people really have no class, no style! Except for that yummy football player over there, he looks great in whatever he's wearing. Oo-la-la! I'm going to talk to him...

Erving Goffman and the Self as a Social Product

In addition to the ideas presented earlier exemplifying reflections of the self in fashion, the often elusive, but always complex, nature of the self might also be reflected in handbags. Erving Goffman proposed that the self is a social product in two ways. First, the self is a product of the performances that people put on in social situations. Second, even if we engage in self-referencing performances, we are compelled to present ourselves in ways that are socially condoned. Ann Branaman explains that, for Goffman, the self is a product of our social performances since, "[t]here is no essence that exists inside an individual, waiting to be given expression in social situations. Rather, *the sense of self arises as a result of publicly validated performances*" (Branaman, 1997: xlvi, my emphasis). Furthermore, "even though individuals play an active role in fashioning these

self-indicating performances, they are generally constrained to present images of themselves that can be socially supported in the context of a given status hierarchy. Thus, the self is a social product in the sense that it depends upon validation awarded and withheld in accordance with the norms of a stratified society" (Branaman, 1997: xlvi).

Another related idea involves the extent to which one is capable of maintaining a respectable self-image in the eyes of others. As Bourdieu pointed out, accomplishing respectability depends upon one's access to structural resources and the collection of traits and attributes considered desirable by the dominant culture (Branaman, 1997). Access to structural resources depends on social status, and varies accordingly. Goffman argues that the self relies on social structures associated with social status and power, and depends on possession of traits and attributes determined to be desirable by the dominant culture for sustenance (Goffman, 1963b). Importantly, however, "Goffman emphasizes that individuals are not able to choose freely the images of self they would have others accept, but rather are constrained to define themselves in congruence with the statuses, roles, and relationships they are accorded by the social order" (Branaman, 1997: xlvii). For Goffman, the self is typically fashioned out of multiple, loosely connected social roles. These multiple meanings can be usefully applied to women's social roles as reflected in the handbags that they carry. Ideas of performance and performativity emerge as the spine that holds the above ideas and situations together.

While symbolic interactionism is not immediately useful for the project at hand, and Goffman himself his well aware of the limitations of extrapolation to social situations beyond those that are "concrete," his concept of performativity is applicable to women, handbags, and identity performance. Perhaps even Goffman's theatrical metaphors

become useful as well. For instance, a woman who is strutting about with an expensive bag is surely making a statement about herself and her identity to the world. It is the combination of the expensive status object and the demeanor involved in the presentation of the self to observers that produces this theatricality. In any event, this section of the thesis is based upon the premise that everyone engages in some type of public performance on a regular basis, regardless of who they are. Goffman's performativity remains applicable in the case of the strutting, performing woman and in the case of the average woman who carries items within the handbag to facilitate her everyday performance in the public realm. Handbags are also used to complement a cross-dresser's performance of femininity.

To clarify, a performance, as defined by Goffman, is "all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants" (1959: 15). For Goffman, when an individual enters the presence of others, she or he will engage an information-gathering technique in order to learn about the individual, level of education, marital status, etc., and thus define or categorize them. Since it is unlikely that the others will succeed in gaining full information about the individual during a social encounter, or the individual regarding the others, short cuts are used as predictive devices. These devices or "sign-vehicles" may include processing information about conduct, expressions, gestures, appearance, and especially status symbols such as what type of handbag is carried.

The gathered information is then applied to the person's previous experience with individuals of this sort, and perhaps stereotypes are involved in this process. The individual who encounters other people in a social situation is concerned with a reality

complete with social facts that are immediately unavailable, so s/he must rely on clues given via appearances. Handbags give off major clues about who the woman is or wants to present herself to be simply because it is visible, in contrast to a man's wallet, which, even though it may be an expensive Prada, is generally hidden inside a pocket when not in use.

The appearances and impressions of the others provide the individual with information about how to treat them; therefore, "the individual will have to act so that he intentionally or unintentionally *expresses* himself, and the others will in turn have to be *impressed* in some way by him" (Goffman, 1959: 2). Since first impressions are important, an individual who enters the presence of others "will have many motives for trying to control the impression they receive of the situation" (1959: 15). Goffman concerns himself with the more common techniques employed by people interacting in social situations to implement and maintain such impressions. This type of sign activity is important for Goffman, rather than expression given, and he explains:

> The expressiveness of the individual (and therefore his capacity to give impressions) appears to involve two radically different kinds of sign activity: the expression that he *gives*, and the expression that he *gives off*. The first involves verbal symbols or their substitutes which he uses admittedly and solely to convey the information that he and the others are know to attach to these symbols. This is communication in the traditional and narrow sense. The second involves a wide range of action that others can treat as symptomatic of the actor, the expectation being that the action was performed for reasons other than the information conveyed in this way. As we shall have to see, this distinction has an only initial validity. The individual does of course intentionally convey misinformation by means of both of these types of communication, the first involving deceit, the second feigning (1959: 2).

Handbags communicate information about the person carrying it in Goffman's second scenario, and can be considered symptomatic of the individual where the bag is meant to make a certain statement to observers. As Goffman suggests, the person might

intentionally convey misinformation involving feigning or pretence. As mentioned earlier, fashion and accessories provide useful vehicles for individuals to pretend to be something or someone other than what or who they really are. Again, if a woman is unable to afford the entire designer outfit, she often just buys the handbag (Hagerty, 2002; Steele and Borrelli, 1999).

Goffman suggests that we live by inference (1959: 3). If we observe a woman carrying a beautiful, seductive handbag or a black briefcase, we might infer certain things about that woman. A woman who works as a scientist, doctor, or judge would not show up for work in a pink miniskirt with matching marabou feather handbag to perform surgery or take a deposition. That outfit might be just the thing for a different kind of power play at night. The serious daytime briefcase or carry-all revs up the alpha woman's aura of power and authority and enhances her performance. As Hagerty puts it, "[f]rom her bag she whips out a Power Point presentation, a laptop, and a Palm Pilot. Wired and in charge, she's got the whole world in her hand" (2002, 35). Hagerty continues:

> Like a power suit or power car, a power handbag must convey authority, quality, credibility, and trustworthiness. It should be constructed of good quality materials in a standard shape, size, and color. It is a mute ambassador, visually telegraphing a message about its owner. If she wants to lead effectively – or to rise in the hierarchy of the workplace – she knows she must have the right accouterments in her armory (2002: 35).

The actor must believe in the part that s/he is playing in order to give a successful performance. The audience must take the actor seriously and believe that things really are as they appear to be. On the other hand, the cynical actor is not taken in by his or her routine, and is unconcerned with the audience's conception of him or her, or even the social situation at hand. The cynical actor may derive certain pleasures from his or her masquerade, from toying with an audience, as perhaps a cross-dresser might, but

Goffman does not assume that all cynical actors delude the audience out of self-interest. A woman performing for the public by displaying an outrageously expensive status or power handbag might seriously believe her own act and derive pleasure from it, however, the interaction is clearly between the public display of real or imagined status and the private domain of the woman. As Goffman points out:

> It is probably no mere historical accident that the word person, in its first meaning, is a mask. It is rather a recognition of the fact that everyone is always and everywhere, more or less consciously, playing a role.... It is in these roles that we know each other; it is in these roles that we know ourselves. In a sense, and in so far as this mask represents the conception we have formed of ourselves – the role we are striving to live up to – this mask is our truer self, the self we would like to be. In the end, our conception of our role becomes second nature and an integral part of our personality. We come into the world as individuals, achieve character, and become persons (Goffman, 1959: 19).

Referring back to the power handbag, a woman will often consciously invest in an expensive, versatile bag because she knows that it will be "a powerful ally as she conducts business at home and around the globe" (Hagerty, 2002: 36). For example, Hagerty relates the story of Casey Murphy who purchased a classic Lady Dior handbag, made by Christian Dior, for about $1,200. The handbag is named for the late Princess of Wales who favored it, and it is made of quilted leather with the maker's trademark gold charms dangling handsomely from one of its handles: D, I, O, and R. Hagerty continues:

> Says Casey, who was working as a merchandising consultant in the fashion industry when she bought the bag five years ago: 'The fashion industry is image conscious. Insiders know whether something is real or a knock-off. This bag cannot be knocked-off. It requires a major machine for its manufacture, lots of labor, exceptionally heavy hardware, inserts in the handles, and, of course, the quilting. I need the bag for traveling and for doing business, especially in the Far East. Carrying the bag helped jump language barriers, and gave me an edge up. I was perceived as a successful businesswoman who was safe to do business with. The right bag is essential in business, says Casey, who uses the same durable, classic Lady Dior in her current job as a realtor. Mine helps me achieve what I need to achieve. Why not start off on your best foot and not be misassessed?' (2002: 36).

The alpha woman may appear to be more assertive and/or aggressive than a woman who moves slower and clutches her handbag to her body. While contradictions may arise during a performance, in general, the audience expects a certain amount of consistency and coherence between appearance and manner (Goffman, 1959: 25).

In addition to the dilemma posed by expression versus action, Goffman points out certain aspects of idealization and performance. That a performance presents an idealized view of the social situation at hand is not a new concept. It is known, says Goffman, that when an individual enters the presence of others, s/he will give a performance designed to "incorporate and exemplify the officially accredited values of the society" (1959: 35) where "the natural superiority of the male is demonstrated, and the weaker role of the female affirmed" (1959: 39). Today's alpha woman likely would not agree with Goffman on this point, and this is indicative of how the roles of women have changed over the course of the past half-century.

Goffman suggests that a performing individual typically conceals something more than inappropriate pleasures and economies, and he notes six discrepancies between appearances and over-all reality.

First, "in addition to secret pleasures and economies, the performer may be engaged in a profitable form of activity that is concealed from his audience and that is incompatible with the view of his activity which he hopes they will obtain" (Goffman, 1959: 43). Another matter for concealment concerns infallibility where "we find that errors and mistakes are often corrected before the performance takes place, while telltale signs that errors have been made and corrected are themselves concealed. In this way an impression of infallibility, so important in many presentations as revealed by Casey, is

maintained. The impression of infallibility is fostered in academic environments as well as in business, for example, since professors and students alike wish to appear informed and knowledgeable, and prefer to not make verbal or written mistakes for others to see or hear. This impression of infallibility leads to Goffman's notion of the end product. He writes, "in those interactions where the individual presents a product to others, he will tend to show them only the end product, and they will be led into judging him on the basis of something that has been finished, polished, and packaged" (1959: 44). For instance, the long hours of tedious labor remain hidden in the finished, scholarly book. Similarly, the public usually sees the designer handbag-toting woman in her finished, polished, and packaged state, while the long hours of tedious labor, such as hours spent shopping for just the right clothes, shoes, and accessories, remain hidden from view. Time spent in the beauty salon for facials, hair styles and color treatments, manicures, pedicures, and so on, remain hidden from the public gaze in all but the finished product. Daily makeup application is a private, time-consuming activity, and, once again, the public only sees the finished product.

Matters concerning dirty work comprise Goffman's fourth case of concealment. He states: "there are many performances which could not have been given had not tasks been done which were physically unclean, semi-illegal, cruel, and degrading in other ways; but these disturbing facts are seldom expressed during a performance. In Hughes's terms, we tend to conceal from our audience all evidence of "dirty work," whether we do this work in private or allocate it to a servant, to the impersonal market, to a legitimate specialist, or to an illegitimate one" (1959: 44). This type of concealment relates to women who participate in the black market where designer handbags are smuggled

illegally into countries such as the United States, and sold for cheaper prices than in boutiques. These women might know that they are participating in an illegal activity, which must be concealed, all in an effort to produce the finished product of the public self. The general public has no way of knowing how the woman obtained the bag, whether in a chic boutique on Rodeo Drive or from a truck parked in a dark back alley, they only know that she is carrying it.

Closely related to dirty work is the fifth discrepancy between appearance and actual activity. "If the activity of an individual is to embody several ideal standards, and if a good showing is to be made, it is likely then that some of these standards will be sustained in public by the private sacrifice of some of the others. Often, of course, the performer will sacrifice those standards whose loss can be concealed and will make this sacrifice in order to maintain standards whose inadequate application cannot be concealed" (1959: 44).

Goffman relates the sixth and final discrepancy between appearances and reality where "we find performers often foster the impression that they had ideal motives for acquiring the role in which they are performing, that they have ideal qualifications for the role, and that it was not necessary for them to suffer any indignities, insults, and humiliations, or make any tacitly understood "deals," in order to acquire the role" (1959: 46). The performing woman is not likely to admit that she spends time behind the scenes in shops, beauty salons, and so on, perfecting her image. She probably will not admit to spending hundreds of dollars on expensive face creams and teeth-whitening products and procedures. She also might suffer behind closed doors in cosmetic surgical suites, acquiring breast implants, undergoing liposuction, tummy-tucking, face lifts, nose jobs,

and a wide assortment of other so-called appearance-enhancing painful procedures to perfect the finished product. But she is not going to discuss these procedures at cocktail parties. They smile at the compliments they receive on their appearance, acting as though they simply woke up in the morning looking this way. This applies to men as well.

Goffman suggests that a performer tends to conceal or underplay the "activities, facts, and motives which are incompatible with an idealized version of himself and his products. In addition, a performer often engenders in his audience the belief that he is related *to them* in a more ideal way than is always the case" (1959: 48). He provides two examples: "First, individuals often foster the impression that the routine they are presently performing is their only routine or at least their most essential one.... The audience, in their turn, often assume that the character projected before them is all there is to the individual who acts out the projection for them" (1959: 48). Of course, women who carry handbags are capable of showing different sides of themselves depending on the social situation at hand. A designer status bag might be traded in for a beach bag, briefcase, or evening bag, depending on what activity the woman is engaged in on that particular day or time.

Unmeant gestures are important for Goffman, and he states: "It has been suggested that the performer can rely upon his audience to accept minor cues as a sign of something important about his performance. This convenient fact has an inconvenient implication. By virtue of the same sign-accepting tendency, the audience may misunderstand the meaning that a cue was designed to convey, or may read an embarrassing meaning into gestures or events that were accidental, inadvertent, or incidental and not meant by the performer to carry any meaning whatsoever" (1959: 51).

It is possible that a woman carrying an expensive bag does not necessarily care about creating a calculated image. Perhaps the Hermes Birkin or Prada backpack that she carries simply contains the right amount and size of inner compartments that she prefers and has the means to acquire with money earned from a meaningful career.

Some performances require a high degree of expressive care, as in the typical middle-class funeral, but other often overlooked everyday performances "must often pass a strict test of aptness, fitness, propriety, and decorum...." (Goffman, 1959: 55). What this most often means is that "we must be prepared to see that the impression of reality fostered by a performance is a delicate, fragile thing that can be shattered by very minor mishaps" (1959: 56). A certain bureaucratization of the spirit is expected so that we can be relied upon to give a perfectly homogenous performance at every appointed time" (Goffman, 1959: 56). As mentioned earlier, the suddenly or accidentally exposed contents of the handbag might produce gasps from an audience at the circus. The exposed privacy and secrecy of the bag's interior may cause embarrassment for both the bag's owner and surprised onlookers alike when personal items such as tampons or condoms accidentally cascade across the floor, disrupting the handbag owner's performance and leaving her exposed.

Importantly, Goffman asserts, "[t]hrough social discipline, then, a mask of manner can be held in place from within. But as Simone de Beauvoir suggests, we are helped in keeping this pose by clamps that are tightened directly on the body, some hidden, some showing:

> Even if each woman dresses in conformity with her status, a game is still being played: artifice, like art, belongs to the realm of the imaginary. It is not only that girdle, brassiere, hair-dye, make-up disguise body and face; but that the least sophisticated of women, once she is "dressed," does not present *herself* to

> observation; she is, like the picture or the statue, or the actor on the stage, an agent through whom is suggested someone not there – that is, the character she represents, but is not. It is this identification with something unreal, fixed, perfect as the hero of a novel, as a portrait or a bust, that gratifies her; she strives to identify herself with this figure and thus to seem to herself to be stabilized, justified in her splendor (Beauvoir in Goffman, 1959: 58).

If the individual is to employ "proper" means of influencing the way in which the observer treats them, then s/he will give little conscious need to the fact that impressions are being formed about them as they speak, "but rather act without guile or contrivance, enabling the individual to receive valid impressions about them and their efforts" (Lemert and Branaman, 1997: 22). Correct impressions are allowed to be formed in this way. Of course, "[i]t is always possible to manipulate the impression the observer uses as a substitute for reality because a sign for the presence of a thing, not being that thing, can be employed in the absence of it. The observer's need to rely on representations of things itself creates the possibility of misrepresentation" (Lemert and Branaman, 1997: 22).

A dialectic arises where individuals in their role as performers are concerned with establishing and maintaining the impression that they are meeting the requirements and the standards by which they, and the objects that they wear or carry, such as handbags, are judged. As Lemert and Branaman point out, "[b]ecause these standards are so numerous and so pervasive, the individuals who are performers dwell more than we might think in a moral world. But, *qua* performers, individuals are concerned not with the moral issue of realizing these standards, but with the amoral issue of engineering a convincing impression that these standards are being realized" (1997: 23). Furthermore:

> Our activity, then, is largely concerned with moral matters, but as performers we do not have a moral concern with them. As performers we are merchants of morality. Our day is given over to intimate contact with the goods we display and our minds are filled with intimate understandings of them; but it may well be that the more attention we give to these goods, then the more distant we feel from

> them and from those who are believing enough to buy them. To use a different imagery, the very obligation and profitability of appearing always in a steady moral light, of being a socialized character, forces one to be the sort of person who is practiced in the ways of the stage (Lemert and Branaman, 1997: 23).

Sometimes the entire system simply breaks down, and sometimes the transfer of information via signs and appearances works smoothly. Even if the performer and the character are of a different order, both have their meaning in terms of "the show must go on" (1997: 23).

Regarding an individual's character, Lemert and Branaman suggest:

> A correctly staged and performed scene leads the audience to impute a self to a performed character, but this imputation – this self – is a *product* of a scene that comes off, and is not a *cause* of it. The self, then, as a performed character, is not an organic thing that has a specific location, whose fundamental fate is to be born, to mature, and to die; it is a dramatic effect arising diffusely from a scene that is presented, and the characteristic issue, the crucial concern, is whether it will be credited or discredited (1997: 23-24).

The self is a product of the person who possesses it, "from the person who will profit or lose most by it, for he and his body merely provide the peg on which something of collaborative manufacture will be hung for a time" (Lemert and Branaman, 1997: 24). Furthermore, "the means for producing and maintaining selves do not reside inside the peg; in fact these means are often bolted down in social establishments. There will be a team of persons whose activity on stage in conjunction with available props will constitute the scene from which the performed character's self will emerge, and another team, the audience, whose interpretive activity will be necessary for this emergence. The self is a product of all of these arrangements, and in all of its parts bears the marks of this genesis" (Lemert and Branaman, 1997: 24). The performing individual has a capacity to learn, and this is exercised while training for a part in the performance. A character staged in a theater is not in some ways real, nor does it have the same kind of real

consequences as does the thoroughly contrived character performed by a confidence man; but the *successful* staging of either of these types of false figures involves use of *real* techniques – the same techniques by which everyday persons sustain their real social situations (Lemert and Branaman, 1997: 25).

Carl Jung (1971) put forth a theory regarding the feminine and masculine tendencies of individuals, which he termed anima and animus. Jung's theory of anima has been related to cross-dressing by Catherine Anderson who explains that every boy has traits that are considered to be feminine and therefore inappropriate by society. The boy learns to repress his feminine traits, which become the anima, and become manifested in dreams and fantasies. He adopts a "normal" male persona or mask, and performs as a male throughout life until middle age when he becomes so unhappy because of the limitations of his masculine persona that he might feel an overwhelming urge to wear women's clothes. Society says cross-dressing is "wrong," but he feels that it is right, and he might feel guilt and shame in addition to profound gender confusion. He may remain a highly closeted, confused cross-dresser or he may embrace the culture of cross-dressing and even take female hormones while considering a sex change. In any event, the cross-dresser embraces the performance of acting female, since it releases repressed female aspects of his personality, the anima (http://ourworld.compuserve.com/homepages/cathytg/anima.htm). Jung's theory is limited with respect to cross-dressers; indeed, Jung did not specifically address cross-dressing, yet his theory is worth mentioning since it sheds light on certain aspects of the personality. Perhaps there is no single theory that has the ability to fully explain cross-dressing, and we must investigate further.

Necessary Drag

Michel Foucault and Judith Butler expand upon the concept of multiplicity and its associated difficulties with gender representation. Since contemporary society offers a wide variety of lifestyle choices, individuals are allowed more freedom from the constraints of tradition to make choices that create meaningful self-identities, and Foucault and Butler take up this multiplicity of meanings. Foucault reminds us that where there's resistance, there's power (1981). Foucault's work contributes to the advancement of feminist debates on several dimensions, outlined by Brooks as follows: "his disruption of fixed and stable categories of sexuality and sex; his conceptualization of new forms of power; his relationship between power and pleasure; and his articulation of the link between resistance and identity" (Brooks, 1997: 190).

Cross-dressers confirm Foucault's suggestion that "power relations are unstable and that resistance is perpetual and hegemony precarious" (Brooks, 1997: 191). The link between resistance and power holds implications for conceptualizations of identity, since Foucault proposes that all discourses give rise to resistance and, therefore, allows a more fluid, more partial identity (Brooks, 1997: 191-192). Brooks reports that Foucault's conception of identity as historically constructed is compatible with an analysis of identity by lesbian feminists (1997: 192).

Judith Butler deconstructs feminist identity politics and its foundational premises She argues that divisions along gender lines are simply the articulation of repeated performances of culturally sanctioned acts of gender, with shades of Goffman lingering in the background in terms of presentation of self. Most importantly, taking the concept

of performativity with her, Butler soon leaves Goffman behind by suggesting that homosexuality *and* heterosexuality are masquerades (1990: 174-180).

Butler's theory of gender stems from Austin's linguistic account of an effect produced in the announcement of its presence or naming, and this effect is traced into the arena of sex/gender identity. Gender is then brought into being as it is 'announced' in and through the stylized rituals and repetitions of everyday life, and these practices retroactively and over time create a gender identity effect (Campbell and Harbord, 1999: 229). For Campbell and Harbord:

> What is most challenging about Butler's account is that the theatricality of the performative process applies not only to the scenarios of drag, the most 'obvious' sites of cross-gender identifications, but the theatrical acts of mimesis circle back to the centre, to insist that all gender identification is constituted through the imitative process. Femininity and masculinity are but imitations of an imitation with no original. Thus, heterosexuality is pushed from its pedestal of providing the origin of sexual roles (1999: 230).

Butler's radical conception of identity builds upon a model where space is created for a wide range of sexual identities, especially gay and lesbian identities (1990). These identities emerge to destabilize the cohesiveness of identity categories, exposing the regulatory fiction of heterosexual unity (Brooks, 1997: 193). Consequently, the aspects of performativity within homosexual practices, such as drag and butch-femme roles, "become privileged sites for the redescription of possibilities that already exist. It is the identification of gay men and lesbians with butch/femme roles that act to subvert essentialist notions of identity" (Brooks, 1997: 193). In this way, both drag and butch/femme become performative in that neither can be seen as imitative since all performances are imitations of fantasized ideals, hence masquerades (Brooks, 1997: 193).

Heterosexuality, Butler suggests, is also a masquerade. She writes, "[i]f the inner truth of gender is a fabrication and if a true gender is a fantasy instituted and inscribed on the surface of bodies, then it seems that genders can be neither true nor false, but are only produced as the truth effects of a discourse of primary and stable identity" (Butler, 1990: 174). She also suggests that "drag fully subverts the distinction between inner and outer psychic space and effectively mocks both the expressive model of gender and the notion of a true gender identity" (Butler, 1990: 174). For Butler, drag is akin to a double inversion that says appearance is an illusion, and the cultural notion of a true or original identity is often parodied within the cultural practices of drag, cross-dressing, and butch/femme identities. She says, "[w]ithin feminist theory, such parodic identities have been understood to be either degrading to women, in the case of drag and cross-dressing, or an uncritical appropriation of sex-role stereotyping from within the practice of heterosexuality, especially in the case of butch/femme lesbian identities" (Butler, 1990: 174-175).

Brooks relates that Butler "claims that drag is subversive to the extent that it reflects on the imitative structure by which hegemonic gender is itself produced, and disputes heterosexuality's claim on naturalness and originality. However, both drag and butch-femme are problematic conceptually and in their application, which reflects difficulties with the concept of performativity" (Brooks, 1997: 193). In Butler's words, "[t]he performance of drag plays upon the distinction between the anatomy of the performer and the gender that is being performed. But we are actually in the presence of three contingent dimensions of significant corporeality: anatomical sex, gender identity, and gender performance" (Butler, 1990: 175). By way of explanation, Butler continues to

say, "[i]f the anatomy of the performer is already distinct from the gender of the performer, and both of those are distinct from the gender of the performance, then the performance suggests a dissonance not only between sex and performance, but sex and gender, and gender and performance" (Butler, 1990: 175). And what this means is that:

> As much as drag creates a unified picture of "woman" (what its critics often oppose), it also reveals the distinctness of those aspects of gendered experience which are falsely naturalized as a unity through the regulatory fiction of heterosexual coherence. *In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself – as well as its contingency* (Butler, 1990: 175).

As with most performances, carrying a certain type of handbag often brings forth feelings of pleasure. And Butler points out that, "part of the pleasure, the giddiness of the performance is in the recognition of a radical contingency in the relation between sex and gender in the face of cultural configurations of causal unities that are regularly assumed to be natural and necessary. In the place of the law of heterosexual coherence, we see sex and gender denaturalized by means of a performance which avows their distinctness and dramatizes the cultural mechanism of their fabricated unity" (Butler, 1990: 175).

Butler's notion of gender parody does not assume an existing original identity that then becomes imitated by parodic identities. In fact, "gender parody reveals that the original identity after which gender fashions itself is an imitation without an origin"; therefore, a fluidity of identities is produced that "suggests an openness to resignification and recontextualization; parodic proliferation deprives hegemonic culture and its critics of the claim to naturalized or essentialist gender identities" (Butler, 1990: 176).

To be clear, according to Butler, although these gender meanings that are taken up in parodic styles are obviously part of "hegemonic, misogynist culture, they are

nevertheless denaturalized and mobilized through their parodic recontextualization" (Butler, 1990: 176). In fact:

> As imitations which effectively displace the meaning of the original, they imitate the myth of originality itself. In the place of an original identification which serves as a determining cause, gender identity might be reconceived as a personal/cultural history of received meanings subject to a set of imitative practices which refer laterally to other imitations and which, jointly, construct the illusion of a primary and interior gendered self or parody the mechanism of that construction (Butler, 1990: 176).

Apart from Bahktinian notions of the body mentioned earlier, and further to Joan Jacob Brumberg's work, Butler offers a fresh and convincing perspective regarding the body, specifically the gender of that body. Butler asks, "[i]f the body is not a "being," but a variable boundary, a surface whose permeability is politically regulated, a signifying practice within a cultural field of gender hierarchy and compulsory heterosexuality, then what language is left for understanding this corporeal enactment, gender, that constitutes its "interior" signification on its surface?" (1990: 177). She answers:

> Sartre would perhaps have called this act "a style of being," Foucault, "a stylistics of existence." And in my earlier reading of Beauvoir, I suggest that gendered bodies are so many "styles of the flesh." These styles all never fully self-styled, for styles have a history, and those histories condition and limit the possibilities. Consider gender, for instance, as *a corporeal style*, an "act," as it were, which is both intentional and performative, where "*performative*" suggests a dramatic and contingent construction of meaning (1990: 177).

In this way, as a "strategy of survival within compulsory systems, gender is a performance with clearly punitive consequences. Discrete genders are part of what 'humanizes' individuals within contemporary culture; indeed, we regularly punish those who fail to do their gender right" (Butler, 1990: 178). More specifically, Butler contends that "gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts*. The effect of gender is produced through the

stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self" (Butler, 1990: 179).

In the end, gender norms are "impossible to embody," and gender attributes are not expressive but performative, and this distinction between expressive and performative is crucial (Butler, 1990: 179-180). For Butler:

> If gender attributes and acts, the various ways in which a body shows or produces its cultural signification, are performative, then there is no preexisting identity by which an act or attribute might be measured; there would be no true or false, real or distorted acts of gender, and the postulation of a true gender identity would be revealed as a regulatory fiction. That gender reality is created through sustained social performances means that the very notions of an essential sex and a true or abiding masculinity or femininity are also constituted as part of the strategy that conceals gender's performative character and the performative possibilities for proliferating gender configurations outside the restricting frames of masculinist domination and compulsory heterosexuality (1990: 180).

Butler argues that gender identity can be described as a stylized repetition of acts, and reminds us that it is "not whether to repeat but how to repeat, or indeed to repeat and, through a radical proliferation of gender, *to displace*, the very gender norms that enable the repetition itself" (Campbell and Harbord, 1999: 231). Butler takes up this upbeat ending to *Gender Trouble* in *Bodies That Matter* by educating those who inadvertently understood her theory regarding the performativity of gender as any simple and intentional act of cross-dressing. Anyone who believes that Butler is advancing a theory of "if we don't like or want to be one identity we can perform and act another" discovers in her next book that performativity is not a singular 'act,' with some free agency of choice or subjectivity lying behind it (Butler, 1993; Campbell and Harbord, 1999: 231). For Butler, agency is located in the environment and circumstance of activities, ever caught up in various historical forms of repetition. The logic of her argument follows

through the cross-signification of gender across the body in terms of drag kings and queens. Butler emphasizes that we are all in drag – we dress up to present an outward appearance that is either different or similar to which ever social group we are going to meet, who are also dressed up for the same reasons. Our common ground in life is that we dress ourselves each morning in attire or perhaps in costumes that show just how similar, but different, we really are (Lemert, 2002: 275).

Butler's emphasis on gender as performativity takes Goffman's conception of performativity to an entirely new dimension, which proves to be more useful for this discussion of women's handbags and identity. In contrast to notions regarding gender as something one is simply born with, Butler suggests that gender is something we do. For example, gay men often use the purse as a signifier of femininity. Cross-dressers who carry handbags often do so as a form of parody or resistance against the hegemonic discourse regarding culturally accepted gender appropriateness. Similarly, lesbians who choose to carry their "indispensables" in jeans or jacket pockets instead of carrying a purse, often do so as a form of resistance to culturally produced notions of gender performance, masculinist domination and compulsory heterosexuality. In fact, many women, lesbian or "straight," choose to forego carrying a handbag for a variety of reasons, most of which likely have to do with attaining some type of freedom from socially constructed gender roles.

One way of linking Goffman's theory of performativity with Butler's theory of performativity and handbags is through cross-dressers as discussed above. This is an important angle of vision since it is only the existence of sharp distinctions of gender in dress for *men* that make cross-dressing possible – and make it almost impossible for a

woman to cross-dress – which in turn problematizes any simple notion of cross-dressing or butch/femme play as "resistance" because it is parasitic on and plays with the existence of that code which it "resists." Butler maintains that "the replication of heterosexual constructs in non-heterosexual frames brings into relief the utterly constructed status of the so-called heterosexual original. Thus, gay is to straight *not* as copy is to original, but, rather, as copy is to copy. The parodic repetition of 'the original' ... reveals the original to be nothing other than a parody of the *idea* of the natural and the original" (Butler, 1990: 41). Furthermore, "[i]n both butch and femme identities, the very notion of an original or natural identity is put into question; indeed, it is precisely that question as it is embodied in these identities that becomes one source of their erotic significance (Butler, 1990: 157). In fact:

> The idea that butch and femme are in some sense 'replicas' or 'copies' of heterosexual exchange underestimates the erotic significance of these identities as internally dissonant and complex in their resignification of the hegemonic categories by which they are enabled. Lesbian femmes may recall the heterosexual scene, as it were, but also displace it at the same time (Butler, 1990: 157).

Importantly, Butler points out that any theorizing about the body as a cultural construct should question "the body as a construct of suspect generality when it is figured as passive and prior to discourse" (1990: 164).

Butler discusses queer identity and performativity, however, it is mainly heterosexual performativity that is the issue in this thesis, specifically the female performance. Perhaps similar processes and patterns are recognizable across identity performances, but it is the concept of performativity, introduced by Goffman and re-introduced by Butler, and its involvement with women's handbags, that remains the focus. Goffman's and Butler's notions of performance and performativity provide the

basis for this analysis, but further exploration is necessary to explain the reproduction of heterosexuality and heteronormative performativity with regard to handbags. One way of gaining clearer understanding is through examination of the contents of the handbag.

The contents of handbags and their relationship to theory, especially Butler's theory, are important for this discussion because, more than men, women are most often associated with handbags. It follows that the items carried within the bag become important as well, particularly with respect to gender identity. As Moya Lloyd points out, many people assume that it is possible to demarcate one gender from another, the spatial dimension often found in feminist accounts of gender. Lloyd also discusses the substantialist dimension in the account of gender as a set of characteristics, where the emphasis is on the idea of an internal essence or presence that precedes 'social and linguistic coding' (Lloyd, 1999: 196).

What is most important in Lloyd's work is her assertion that, within the context of gender, "it is assumed that there is a *something* which is regarded as fundamental to female identity prior to engendering (the acquisition of feminine characteristics): a maternal nature, a specific mode of reasoning, natural passivity, a specific erotic nature, a developmental trajectory" (1999: 196). This brings us back to Henrietta Timmons, whose ideas regarding women and handbags smack of determinism and essentialism. Lloyd continues on to say:

> Together, these two elements (the spatial and the substantial) produce accounts of identity that are essentially descriptivist; that is, that permit analysis and political articulation only through the enumeration of *relevant* features of identity. Such ontologies of gender establish, therefore, what counts as 'intelligible sex,' determining the kinds of identity that are permitted to exist and those that are not. By setting out boundaries and markers around specific identities gender, understood in oppositional and substantial terms, becomes another (literal and figurative) mode of containment (1999: 196).

Of course, Butler replaces this conception of gender identity with her theory of gender performativity, reconstituting space as social space, "the symbolic realm in which subjects interpellate and hail other subjects, in which the performative enactment of gender occurs" (Lloyd, 1999: 197).

After theorizing about the handbag itself, the exterior appearance and the variety of meanings associated with it, I now turn to the source of Freudian fears of danger and castration: the interior of the handbag.

It's in the Bag: Intrigue, Mystery, and Possible Danger

I had occasion to dine with a large group of business people in a large city in the United States one evening, both men and women, and both Canadian and American. It is not uncommon for my conversations to turn into something sociological, and this evening was no exception. One of the men at the table was the head of Human Resources for an international company, but was previously employed at a mental institution for a number of years, and retained a strong interest in all things psychological. When he discovered my research interests in women's handbags, a lively group conversation ensued. I heard a number of things about women and handbags, from both gender perspectives, but the most interesting news was that the American women all carried handguns along with the usual assortment of items found in handbags. Of course, this may be a result of the gun legislation in the United States that makes handgun ownership more accessible than in Canada, but I found it interesting that guns in handbags were as common as tissues and Tylenol in this particular group. In fact, a discussion then followed regarding the appropriate size and style of different guns that fit nicely into the pouches of various handbags. Easy retrieval of the gun from the bag was the key issue here, since there is

little reason to carry gun if it is not readily available when one really needs it. The gun is a serious source of female protection and security, and it is thought that it is most likely to be used against males rather than other females. Perhaps Freud was right to fear the secret spaces of females.

An historical inquiry of the handbag took place in previous chapters, as well as theoretical and practical discussions of the various meanings associated with handbags in the public gaze. Moving away from the multiplicity of meanings associated with the handbag as a public object, let us entertain the possibilities of meanings associated with the most common objects contained within the handbag: personal items necessary for managing the body in the public sphere, keys, and a wallet.

The contents of the handbag are generally very private, while the bag itself is very public. Therefore, the bag is a border between the public and the private. A decidedly feminine marker, the bag's exterior hides whatever the owner desires to carry and conceal.

Like most women, cross-dressers are also very attached to the contents of their handbags. One transvestite offers a detailed and revealing account of what he does and does not carry along for a night on the town. When he used to carry a larger handbag, it always contained a hairbrush for his wig, but now he simply brushes his wig thoroughly before leaving the house. He has discovered that touching up the wig once it is on his head is easier to do with the fingers, and it has the added advantage of making the hair look more untidy and therefore more natural.

Another item missing from his handbag is money. It is difficult to dance with a bag flapping around your shoulder, and, unless you wish to place the bag on the floor and

dance around it, which restricts you to one area of the dance floor, the only other choice is to leave it at the table. Of course, theft is always a threat, so this is not a good idea. It is best to carry money in a small purse attached to the belt, in his opinion. He notes that it looks a little like a hand grenade, but it *is* very useful.

Carrying spare stockings is necessary if dark stockings are your choice for the evening, since the slightest damage will show quicker than it will on lighter colored stockings. One probably does not need to bring an extra pair of light colored stockings along. But he notes that there is a down side to wearing pale shades of stockings as well, as they require closer attention to leg shaving in preparation for the evening.

Dancing causes men to sweat, and wearing a wig and heavy make-up causes men to sweat profusely. Therefore, items such as powder, lipstick, and lip-liner are all necessary for routine touch-ups throughout the course of the evening. He also carries a small perfume spray to smell nice should the deodorant wear off. A handkerchief is absolutely necessary, since sweat mixed with make-up stings the eyes and needs something more substantial than a tissue. He counsels, "[u]sed with reasonable delicacy, the hankie can be better than a tissue for mopping up the 'glow' without wrecking the eye make-up" (http://www.transformation.co.uk/handbag3.html).

To respond to other needs, he carries a ladylike nail file in a little plastic case, which can be hazardous to nylon stockings. Rough or dirty nails are not feminine. He also carries four small safety pins, pinned together for convenience and easy retrieval in case of a clothing emergency. Right next to the pins, which usually migrate to the bottom of the bag, is a small card with a dozen or so kirby-grips, which are necessary for keeping a wig fixed to the real hair. The grips can also be used to pin back one's own hair if it is

determined to escape from the confines of the wig, and this is especially important when wig and real hair are different colors.

This transvestite reveals that a mirror is an essential accessory to be carried in the handbag, and it should be contained within a sturdy case to avoid damage and harm. He says, "I used to carry a plain rectangle or round mirror, but found it was apt to break if carried in a handbag. Apart from the risk of seven years' bad luck, broken glass is dangerous and *certainly* not what I want to find on thrusting my hand into the bag" (http://www.transformation.co.uk/handbag2.html). Once again, shades of Freud.

The oddest item in his handbag is a four-inch nail. He explains:

> In several toilets I've used, the sliding part of the bolt has been missing from the cubicle doors. A nightmare scenario is to be sat there with my knickers down, only to have a woman with more sensibility than sense burst in on me. At best, a trannie is only allowed in the ladies under sufferance – and there are limits one must not cross. So…slide the four-inch nail into the bolt fixings and it's securely held (http://www.transformation.co.uk/handbag3.html).

No one can know for certain what items are concealed in a handbag, or why, unless revealed. In the past, a fashionable woman carried a small handbag containing a few items such as a handkerchief, visiting cards, and perhaps money. A reputable woman refrained from wearing makeup or working outside of the home. By the mid-twentieth century, "the average woman needed a larger bag because she was away from home working, shopping, and socializing" (Steele and Borelli, 1999: 10). In more recent times, there are practical bags, such as totes, satchels, briefcases, backpacks, diaper bags, and sports bags. There are precious, pretty bags, usually evening bags that are small but make a strong visual statement. Most women own on the average of three bags, but wealthy women might own so many handbags that they occupy an entire closet shelf (Hagerty, 2002). Bags can be useful and/or frivolent, but the contents of the bag are almost always

useful for managing the body and negotiating the social world. The contents of bags are also used to project and perform identities for the sake of the self in the gaze of onlookers.

In my discussions with women about their handbags, it has become clear that women carry any number of items in their handbags, and these contents vary widely according to the individual. Surely this is well known to anyone who has contemplated the nature of handbags. What is likely not as well known, however, is the strength and fierceness of a woman's attachment to not only the bag itself, but also the profoundly personal contents contained within.

Most women carry personal items such as tissues and tampons that are required for managing the grotesque body, as Bahktin would say. Other personal items include birth control, aspirin, prescription medications, combs, brushes, nail files/clippers, breath mints, gum, reading glasses, sun glasses, pens, notepads, and so on. Most women also carry some form of makeup and a small mirror.

As mentioned earlier, Simmel's and Bourdieu's class distinctions encounter difficulty when applied to women and handbags, and also in the case of cross-dressers. Attempting to categorize women according to the handbag they carry is simply not always an accurate indicator of social class. The same is true in the case of women who wear makeup. Bourdieu believes that "the working classes value function and labor, while the clerical and managerial classes place a greater emphasis on appearance" (Kondo, 1997: 111). In a similar way, "in choosing clothing or cosmetics, the working classes are presumably concerned with practicality, value, durability, and function;

conforming to normative fashionable bodies and gendered ideals of attractiveness are of peripheral concern" (Kondo, 1997: 111).

In fact, "[i]n the middle classes, for whom performance evaluations on the job may in fact be related to appearance, preoccupations with cosmetics, diet, and proper clothing heighten markedly. Indeed, Bourdieu makes even more precise and far-reaching claims: 'The interest the different classes have in self-presentation, the attention they devote to it, their awareness of the profits it gives and the investment of time, effort, sacrifice, and care which they actually put into it are proportionate to the chances of material or symbolic profit they can reasonably expect from it' (Bourdieu, 1984: 202; Kondo, 1997: 111). Kondo writes that, according to Bourdieu, "the upper classes demonstrate the greatest satisfaction with their appearance and their bodies, as the literal embodiments of hegemonic ideals, conquering nature through the moral/aesthetic value they call "*tenue*" – that which is not vulgar. Once again, the correlations are presented as being seamlessly – and suspiciously – tight" (Kondo, 1997: 111-112; Bourdieu, 1984: 206). Kondo states: "[w]hile Bourdieu's reproductive model is compelling in its general contours, empirical realities are likely to be more open ended, contradictory, and complicated. And it is precisely the fissures and contradictions in such a narrative of reproduction that might reveal contestatory possibility (1997: 112).

Attempting to identify women who wear makeup as belonging to the middle or upper classes is representative of the fissures and contradictions that Kondo discusses. Girls and women of all ages and class groups have access to makeup, from dime store makeup to expensive designer makeup. Contrary to Bourdieu's calculus of social class, contemporary women who wear makeup do so as a matter of choice. It is the ontological

basis for the rationale behind this choice that should be the focus. Some women wear makeup because it is part of their ensemble for the day. The makeup matches the outfit, and, therefore, becomes another accessory in addition to a handbag, shoes, a scarf, and jewelry. In this way, makeup becomes part of the performance. However, no one can really tell if the makeup is inexpensive or expensive, not by looking at the makeup on the face. In addition to providing performance enhancement, makeup also becomes part of the performance when a woman casually and publicly removes an Elizabeth Arden compact or an Estee Lauder lip gloss out of her handbag.

Simmel and Goffman, for example, discussed the concept of masks. Makeup can also be used as a mask for the self to hide behind, a way to hide the private from the public. In this way, makeup becomes a barrier or a border between the woman and the world. Thick makeup serves as a sort of shield for the insecure woman to hide behind so that no one will be able to see what she is really like on the inside. This ties in with the earlier example involving "messy purse girls," and other women who suffer from low self-esteem. The role of the beauty industry and advertising must be acknowledged here as well as the issue of cosmetic surgery. The miniature mirror that a woman might carry in her handbag reflects the image presented. If that reflection does not meet current socially constructed beauty ideals, then something must be done to bring the reflection closer to perfection. Makeup is a reasonably inexpensive way of managing this perceived problem for some women.

Most women carry a wallet in their handbag. The wallet usually contains such items as money, debit cards, and credit cards, which identify the owner as a consumer who is linked to the local and global economy. First coins, and then paper money, created

the need for a container for transport and concealment, and the "handbag" was invented to fulfill this need. Identification cards, such as a driver's license are often found in the wallet, possibly along with a social insurance or social security card, birth certificate, and/or passport. These important identification cards show that the person is linked to the state in specific ways. Family images are often found in the wallet, particularly images of children, which identify the owner as part of a family or social group. Membership cards such as required for renting DVDs at the local video store or purchasing groceries at a large grocery chain store, are also found in the wallet. All of these cards identify the owner as part of a community, a society comprised of certain like-minded individuals.

Keys are commonly found in women's handbags. Women might carry house keys, office keys, car keys, safety deposit box key, briefcase/suitcase keys, a diary key, and perhaps even a key to open the lock on their handbag. Keys are linked to a woman's identity, and signal independence, responsibility, protection of privacy, and autonomy. Women also carry a host of other items in their handbags ranging from birth control and personal hygiene products to guns, knives, and mace.

Deeply devoted to designer prestige or completely indifferent to the exterior appearance of the bag and what it might or might not say about them to the larger audience, women and men of all ages from all walks of life are fiercely attached to the contents of their handbag.

Conclusion

This thesis is organized around the fetishism and functionality of the handbag, and its dualities of existing in the public and the private, existing as both border and link. The performative and utilitarian elements of handbags are involved with demand and utility and interact with calculating image performance or complete indifference. The handbag can be a tentative social marker and must be treated with caution during assessment and conclusion. Above all, the handbag is an age-old symbol of femininity, and I have discussed relevant theories put forth by prominent theorists in this respect.

Class and gender issues remain at the heart of the matter concerning the reasons why handbags are sociologically significant objects in cultural spaces. Guided by theory as put forth by Simmel, Bourdieu, Barthes, Baudrillard, Lipovetsky, Kondo, Goffman, and Butler, class and gender aspects with respect to the handbag as a social symbol are traced throughout history, interacting with each other over time. I have pointed out some of the defining moments relating to handbags in an effort to problematize them with respect to gender and identity performance. Through the performance of gender identity, the contrast between haute couture and everyday, ordinary handbags and the men and women who carry them are highlighted. I have shown the various ways of looking at these issues, concluding with Goffman and Butler. Goffman introduces a theory of performativity, and Butler expands on performativity in ways that prove to be more suited to this particular project. Further to the other theorists, Butler discusses the importance of cultural codes and the necessity of receiving, deciphering, and understanding the informative signs. Butler in particular relates this to gender and identity performance. Butler's rendition of the stylized rituals and repetitions of ordinary

life and their interactions with gender and identity are discussed and extrapolated to situations involving handbags. The designer handbag-carrying women, the unpretentious women, the women who remain completely indifferent, and the women who are literally and socially weighed down by the handbag are most notably discussed. Where cross-dressers are concerned, the handbag is a purely fetishized object, and the functional bag becomes de-fetishized.

Mobility ties in as a sub-theme of the issues around the bag as a border. In order for women to be mobile, it is sometimes necessary for them to bring certain items along when navigating the public realm. A handbag is often the receptacle of choice, and has been for some time, hence the relevance of this thesis. Ever-changing and contradicting social roles are highlighted with respect to issues concerning handbags as borders between the public and the private, as well as the ways in which the contents of handbags serve to link women with daily life. It should be noted that, to enable mobility, handbags as well as the hands that carry and use them, are necessary, since handbags and the discourses around them refer to hands themselves.

Handbags serve as a useful investigative tool for analysis of identity and identity performance, and I have discussed pertinent issues pertaining to knowledge gained regarding both men and women through handbags. In general, there are at least three different ways of analyzing handbags – class and gender, identity performance, and mobility "my life is in my handbag" issues – and I have drawn from the different theorists who provide the possibilities for very different analyses of this mundane object. I do not, however, offer a definitive conclusion about the handbag. I set out to problematize the handbag and discuss the different ways of looking at it from different

angles of vision in order to achieve new levels of thought and understanding. I have sought to explain how the handbag is public, private, and a border as well as a link between the two. I conclude by pointing to Butler's notions concerning "necessary drag," where everyone must choose some method of presenting themselves to the public. For Butler, we are all in drag, heterosexuals and homosexuals alike.

Handbags have been part of everyday life for as long as people have had personal items to be carried. Precious items such as coins and later paper money contributed to the need for coin purses such as almoners, initially carried by both men and women. As the bag has evolved through time, it has touched on many social aspects, such as social roles and identity issues, in addition to various aspects concerning dress in the realms of religion, politics, media, and economics. Throughout time, the bag acquired decoration and embellishment, most often by the hands of women, both domestic and professional, at least until the age of mass production, and came to be identified as unmistakably feminine. Handbags have been acquired by museums as exhibits of changing styles and tastes not only pertaining to fashion and fashionable accessories, but also of changing tastes and techniques in textiles and needlework. Purses, then and now, are often given as gifts, perhaps containing money or other precious items. Like tiny time capsules, they provide valuable insights into women and their lives long after the women themselves are gone.

Early bags include delicate drawstring pouches and ecclesiastical purses of intricate needlework design. Bags such as the girdle-pouch and the chatelaine of the seventeenth century were a usual part of getting dressed every day. An important distinction between these bags, which were fastened onto the body, and the later hand-

held bags is that they stayed on the person both inside the private household and outside in the public arena. The medieval woman carried her household accounts and keys in a bag hung from the waist, and, until the eighteenth century when pockets sewn directly into clothing emerged, needlework tools were also carried on the person. According to Wilcox, "[t]his was as much for practical reasons as for security, for it was not until the 1700s that the separate work box developed, freeing the work bag to evolve rapidly into the reticule" (2000: 8).

The eighteenth century reticule was designed to complement the high-waisted Empire line of fashionable dress at the time. Large eighteenth century workbags stand in contrast to the delicate reticule, indicative of sharp class distinctions and gender roles. The emergence of the larger, sturdier handbag in the nineteenth century, often constructed out of leather and metal, was determined out of function as a portable container for the necessities of public life, most notably by increased travel.

Handbags from the twentieth century onward reflect the impact of new designs and manufacturing techniques such as a minimalist European and American aesthetic, and a host of new materials for bags such as imitation patent and vynide. Top fashion designers such as Vuitton, Hermes, and Gucci manufactured handbags and sold them in boutiques, and some of the handbags reached royal and movie star status. In the 1960s, ready-to-wear and youth fashions were all the rage, and the 1970s brought over-sized shoulder bags. Since the 1980s "me" generation paraded handbags with pronounced designer logos and initials, we have seen everything from Chanel's and Gucci's classic, timeless handbags to Prada's nylon backpacks to lively Fendi, Miyake, and Moschino creations. We have seen the metal mesh structures of Nathalie Hambro to the delicate

artistic creations of Lulu Guinness and Judith Leiber. We have seen the handbag evolve from merely function to a madly sought-after and coveted fetish.

The history of the handbag is made even more interesting and complicated by its changing, but also constant, contents. From the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century, items such as money (often in a separate coin purse), keys, handkerchiefs, cosmetics, note pad, pen or pencil, and perhaps a novel or diary remain consistent, and continue to be found in handbags into the present day. In contrast, items such as needlework, a case for visiting cards, and the letter case have disappeared or evolved. Cards, for example, have turned into credit, debit, and business cards now housed in a wallet. The telephone, cell phone, and Blackberry have replaced the practice of letter writing, and hardly anyone knits or does needlework in the company of others anymore. Women, such as Susannah, the Civil War era southern belle in my vignette, carried fans, handkerchiefs, and smelling salts. But thanks to regulated heating and cooling inventions, fans are no longer fashionable. Now, if a woman becomes embarrassed in public, she has only her handbag to hide behind instead of a fan or handkerchief. The tissue, of course, has replaced the handkerchief. Women no longer bind themselves into corsets, and therefore do not faint as much, so there is less need for smelling salts.

The late nineteenth century and early twentieth century saw a great increase in cosmetics, introducing the cosmetic bag to the handbag, which remains very common through to the present day. Smoking materials and bulky banking necessities increased during this time as well, but have since declined in popularity due to better health

information warning against the hazards of smoking and small, lightweight banking cards and passbooks.

What remains constant over time is that handbags contain what is essential and valuable to women, and these contents remain personal and hidden from prying eyes. The exceptions are expensive trinkets such as perfume or thimbles worn like charms at the waists of medieval women, and the Prada see-through bag of the 1950s where only the matching coin purse was teasingly opaque. Chanel also designed a clear-glass box, which is like a shop window offering an enticingly voyeuristic view of another world. Lipovetsky would likely agree with Wilcox's assertion that "[s]how is integral to fashion, yet the handbag manages to be both display and secrecy, public and private, signifier and concealer" (2000: 11). This duality forms the basis of this inquiry, and it is this dual function that gives the handbag its potent appeal.

Dress and cultural historians often discuss clothing as a reflection of affluence or imagination, but accessories can be better historical indicators. Accessories such as handbags are "vital indicators of style because of their ability to transmute more quickly, unlike expensive investments in clothing" (Wilcox, 2000: 11). Women often just buy the designer handbag if they are unable to afford the entire outfit.

Although nineteenth century "hand-bags" were carried by men, indeed almoners were carried by men during the Crusades as well, and the 1970s' shoulder bag and later backpack are androgynous objects, the fashionable handbag has consistently remained a female accessory since men acquired sewn-in pockets. Even the present day man-bags or shuttles have not really caught on. Certainly, throughout the twentieth century, handbags have been highly significant objects for women, and cross-dressers, since, although

influenced by fashion, they become personalized and individualized by the way they are carried and used by their owners, becoming projections of their owners in the process.

Many women today switch regularly from briefcase or tote bag for work, smaller shoulder bags for daytime, diaper bags or shopping bags, and gorgeous evening bags (which happen to be making a revival as jewelry). As Lurie suggests, it is possible that such variety reflects the multi-faceted lives of women, and may even express contradictory sex/gender identities. Butler delves deep into gender identity, and her theory of performativity proves insightful when analyzing cross-dressers and handbags. Butler convincingly dethrones heterosexuality as the provider of original sex roles by arguing that both femininity and masculinity are merely imitations of an imitation with no original. She argues that gender identity comes in and through the stylized rituals and repetitions of everyday life. Butler's concept of "necessary drag" is reflected by RuPaul, who so eloquently insists: "We're born naked and the rest is drag."

Although popular throughout the ages, the handbag as we understand it today is an object that became prominent in the 1880s. The handbag is an accessory that embodies luxury and practicality. It can be a best friend or an expressive social mechanism, a beautifully crafted object of desire and envy or a highly fashionable status symbol. Handbags reflect the spirit and the people of the times as accurately as any article of clothing, and, therefore are interestingly sociologically significant everyday objects worthy of scholarly attention and analysis. Handbags are small but powerful accompaniments to the ever-changing lives of women, and, to the women who cherish them, they have truly become indispensable. Whether a woman carries an incredibly

costly designer handbag or carries a bag that she found buried in the bargain bin, when she announces that, "My life is in my purse," she is quite serious.

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A Pair of Boots by Vincent van Gogh 1887
Baltimore Museum of Art

Mamie Eisenhower
1953

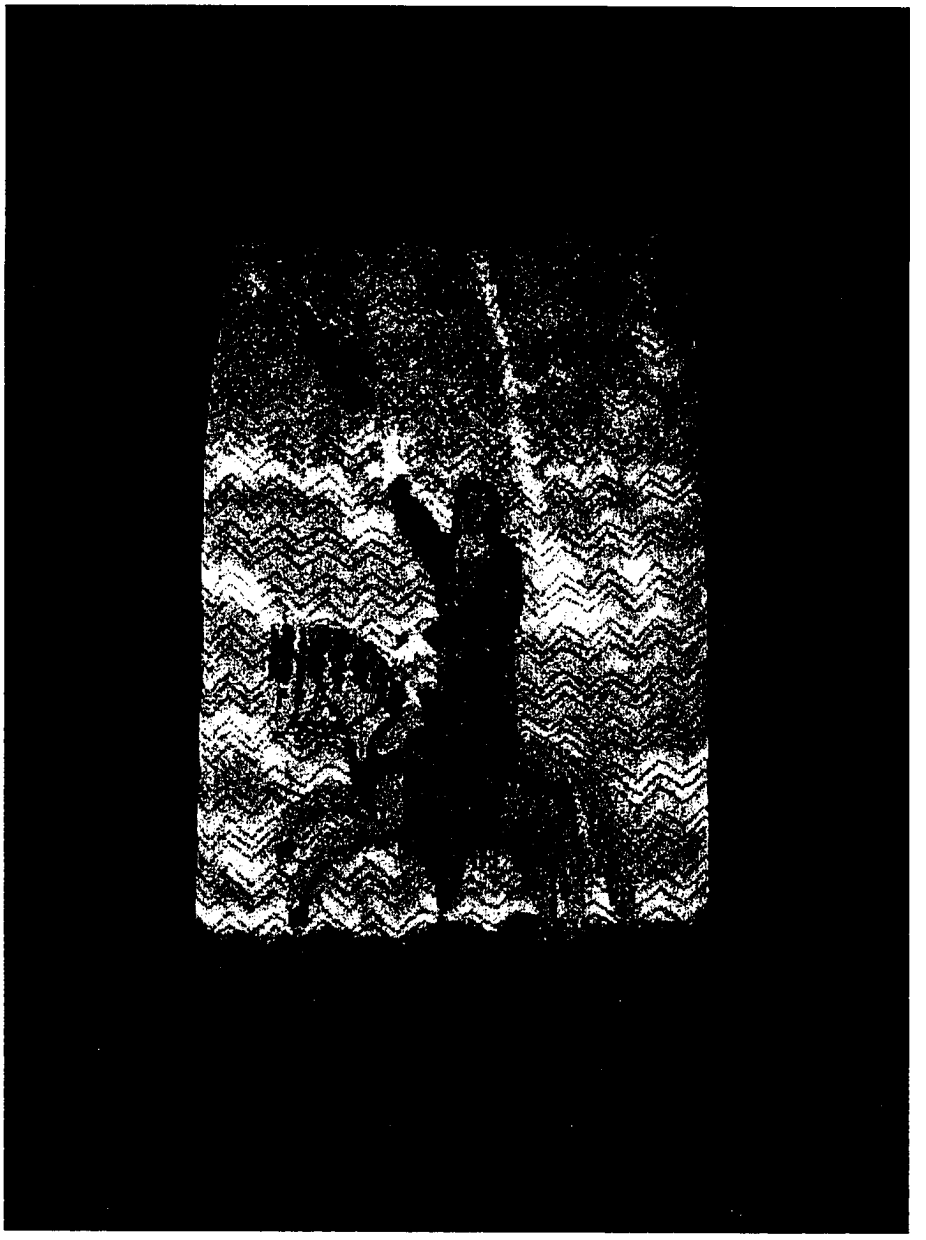
Hermes Kelly Handbag
Made famous by Grace Kelly

Princess Grace hiding her pregnancy behind a Hermes Kelly handbag 1956

Hermes "Trim" 1960s
The Jackie-O Bag

Hermes Birkin Handbag

Martha Stewart



French Almoner's Purse, 14th Century

Reticule