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**University of Alberta**

**A Girl's Guide to Cultural Capital:  
The American Gold Digger, 1900–1950**

by

**Christina J. Barabash**



**A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial  
fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of Masters of Arts**

**Department of English**

**Edmonton, Alberta**

**Spring 2000**



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## ABSTRACT

This thesis traces the emergence of the gold digger as a recognizable figure in twentieth-century American culture and establishes her as part of a tradition of configuring women's identities in relation to economic circumstance. It looks at her historical predecessors and her relationship to evolving modes of commercialization through sociocultural writings from the period. This thesis focuses on the gold digger in four particular historical, economic, and cultural configurations: the prototypical gold digger in Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*; the quintessential gold digger Lorelei Lee of Anita Loos's *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, who defines gold digging in the American consciousness; the gold digger as gangster moll in Dashiell Hammett's *Red Harvest*; the evolving, highly adaptable gold digger of the 1940s and 1950s in Dawn Powell's New York novels, particularly *Angels on Toast*, *A Time To Be Born*, *The Locusts Have No King*, and *The Wicked Pavilion*. The gold digger locates cultural anxiety and excitement about new discourses of urban living, fashion and glamour, and intersections of consumerism and art. The figure of the gold digger complicates feminine ideals, the dichotomy of work and leisure, and the ideology of the American Dream.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks go to my parents, Margaret and Gene Barabash, for their encouragement, which took many forms.

Special thanks go to Professor Edward Bishop for his questions and understanding.



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

		Page
1	The Awakening—of Consumer Desire: The Needs and Conditions of an Aspiring Gold Digger	1
2	A Spotlight of One's Own (and a fur coat a year): <i>Sister Carrie</i> and the Gold Digger <i>Naissante</i>	18
3	"Lady" Lorelei's Lovers: <i>Gentlemen Prefer Blondes</i> and the Fashioning of a Legend	41
4	A Finished Woman: Crime and the Gold Digger in Dashiell Hammett's <i>Red Harvest</i>	73
5	Portrait of the Artist as a Gold Digger: Polymorphic Gold Digging in Dawn Powell's New York Novels	87
6	Works Cited and Consulted	125

# 1 The Awakening—of Consumer Desire The Needs and Conditions of an Aspiring Gold Digger

In 1999, women flock to a singles convention in Silicon Valley, hoping to meet an eligible bachelor of the newest batch of tycoons: the computer-genius-millionaire (McKinnon). The Learning Annex in New York offers courses on meeting and marrying the rich, and Ginnie Sayles, guru of the movement, tours North American and does guest spots on Oprah, practically guaranteeing that following her advice will land you a millionaire (MacDonald). So is the gold digger having a resurgence? Or, in this age of the e-commerce boom and the self-help book epidemic, is there a new figure evolving and emerging? Gold-digger figures are linked to intersections of extreme economic shifts and revaluations of social patterns. In this thesis, I have traced the emergence of the gold digger along the trajectory of historical social changes and sociological writings and literary texts. The early twentieth-century gold digger, as written by Theodore Dreiser, Anita Loos, Dashiell Hammett and Dawn Powell, is a complex figure, constantly shifting between caricature and societal rebel, representing both reproduction and subversion of the status quo. She deserves a place in the study of American literature because her genesis, career, and demise are all implicated in the discourse of the American dream and the realities behind it. The similarities between Dreiser's *Carrie* and the later

gold digger figures in Loos and Powell's fiction, as well as in Dashiell Hammett's novel *Red Harvest*, suggest that the gold digger is not an aberration or oddity, but a type of the modern era. The differences between these figures suggest the changes in western culture's perception of itself as a modern money-credit economy while artistic expression and cultural control in representation become increasingly linked to, and complicated by, the market. I have selected for this study of girlfriend/date as cultural capital texts that have some fluidity in terms of their position in the cultural field. I deliberately chose novels that were part of the popular discourse but were also acclaimed, to varying extents, as literary.

The construction of the gold digger is based on the tension between mythic and realistic; she is both a dreamlike vision and a grasping creature with base desires. *Random House Historical Dictionary of American Slang* records the first use of the term gold digger in 1915. Although the entry cites examples from as late as 1988, eleven of the fifteen usages are from texts between 1915 and 1941. The gold digger is, for the most part, a figure peculiar to this period of American culture, when Americans tried to move fast enough to keep up with the new flickering representations of themselves. She is also particularly interesting to a study of the economic climate and culture that emerges in the United States in the first three decades of the twentieth century because she is at once woman and object. She is written and created as an economic symbol: the gold digger embodies the tension

between woman as object and woman as subject. This may also be one reason why the gold digger has been ignored in serious studies of popular modernist culture. She is always already objectified and she herself is quite likely aware of it. This thesis explores sites where the gold digger emerges, in reality and cultural artifacts, and the ways that representations of the gold digger affected and were affected by socioeconomic conditions. The gold digger can be traced historically as an important figure in popular modernist texts and a sensitive indicator of economic imbalance.

The gold digger is closely related to the flapper. Both figures are “good-time girls,” preoccupied with partying, the latest fashions, and sexual experiences. The flapper is typically described, however, as carefree: “The generic flapper is the nice girl who is a little fast, who takes the breath of staid observers with her flip spontaneity, her short-lived likes and dislikes.... Flappers ... had to be rather well off. Unprosperous folk did not have the cash or time to belong...” (Stevenson 124–25). Martin Pumphrey suggests that the flapper’s story is a product of advertising. Although her “unencumbered simplified clothing, short hair and boyish figure, rebellious lifestyle and pursuit of pleasure, did genuinely challenge nineteenth-century constructions of femininity,” the most important feature of the flapper was that

her hectic social life and quest for individuality required clothes for innumerable occasions: travelling, shopping, lunching, weddings, outdoor amusements, tea, dining, theatre, dancing.... Constantly in movement, the

Flapper required cars, trains, and planes at her disposal. Enjoying sport and the healthy life, she needed outfits for driving, golf, and tennis. Looking for a suntan in summer and skiing in winter, she took advantage of the summer cruises and winter holidays being offered by the new tour companies. Seeking nightlife, she frequented places of luxury and expense. (186)

The story presented by advertisers is rich in visual effect. Advertising, however, works by leaving narratives incomplete. The inferences or conclusions that the reader is prompted to make become a powerful part of the sell. Gaps allow a certain amount of identification on the part of the viewer while enabling the construction to be strictly surface and perfectly, modernly smooth. However, the gaps can also highlight the assumptions and inequities underlying the advertisement's meaning. Pumphrey notes the silences in the flapper's narrative. Her success as a symbol necessitates that "she is neither vamp nor tramp" and yet

we never see her at work, not do we have any idea how she earns the money she spends. She enjoys the New Freedom not in terms of a career or political action but in terms of carefree leisure, leisure without consequences. Her image beckons to others to follow—to be essentially themselves—but evades the question how they are to gain the money to do so or how they should deal with the social conflicts they (but apparently not she) must inevitably encounter. Her expression of individuality and personality is wholly constructed around a powerful consumer fantasy that excludes economic limitations, class restraints, and conflict. (186–87)

The gold digger shares in this consumerist fantasy of the flapper's subjective desires but by definition, the gold digger is an economically based creation. For all her frothy lingerie and sensual fashion, the gold digger addresses the economic reality of

the “new” consumer desires. Or she addresses at least, one reality: the reality that if she has not inherited the money necessary for the flapper lifestyle, there was little chance that a girl<sup>1</sup> would be able to afford it by working at the type of the job available to her. The gold digger, like the flapper, does not work, at least, not in the conventional sense of the word. But the source of the gold digger’s money is not mysterious. Although her actual practices of speculative seduction may be shrouded in ambiguity, the source of her capital is not. Her expenses are paid by the men whose company she keeps—men who have more access than she does to the promised rewards of the American dream.

The gold digger is also associated with the “woman adrift.” This term was coined to evoke the young, working-class woman who comes to the city for employment. She is adrift because she is away from her family’s domestic sanctuary, and finds herself being carried by the determinist currents of the urban environs. Society’s anxiety about such women centered on the absence of moral guidance in their lives. This anxiety spawned organizations like the YWCA or other charitable foundations run by middle-class women with ideological motivations to preserve the purity of women adrift: “[a] young, single woman needed protection...not simply to

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<sup>1</sup> I use the word girl in various places throughout this thesis to reflect the historical terminology used in the period. Many popular magazines, for instance, wrote about the “modern girl” and what she wanted. Although the phrase “New woman” continued to be used, the preoccupation with the “modern girl” suggested that changes in feminine behavior were most noticeable among youth cultures.

ease material hardships but also to guide and restrain her sexual behavior. Protection included supervision and training in morality” (Meyerowitz 48). Women adrift could live in homes subsidized by these middle-class organizations, as boarders in settings that replicated the family home and familial intimacy to varying degrees, or on their own—or with roommates—in a self-contained unit (Meyerowitz 72). The adaptation of the woman adrift to bourgeois norms helps clarify the context in which the gold digger emerges. Not only does she situate the economic circumstances that may be a factor in the gold digger’s career choice, she also helps instigate a lifestyle pattern that is key to the gold digger’s practices. The peer subcultures that Meyerowitz traces, involving sexual partners and friends of both genders, enable the gold digger to participate, somewhat safely, in urban public spaces. The gold digger requires independence from parental dictates, freedom from the circumscribed life of a small-town, closely knit community. The gold digger requires an urban setting for a number of reasons: it provides her with expensive nightclubs and restaurants in which she may meet prospective sugar daddies, it contains a variety of luxurious settings that can be used as backgrounds for her leisure-work, and it facilitates anonymity, when desired, and a degree of protection from censure.

Kathy Peiss writes about the working women who did not have access through their own incomes to the kinds of clothing and leisure activities flapper culture popularized. Peiss uses the word “treating” to refer to a type of lowbrow gold

digging—the practice of working women allowing their beaux and dates to pay for their amusement:

Typically... young women looked to men for financial assistance and gifts. “If they didn’t take me, how could I ever go out?” observed a young department store worker. Treating was a widely accepted practice, especially if the woman had a fiance, or “steady” from whom she could accept food, clothing, and recreation without compromising her reputation.... Clara X. depended on her beau, who earned more than twice her income, to occasionally purchase her clothes and take her on vacation.... Other self-supporting women had no qualms about accepting treats from unknown men or chance acquaintances. As one observer concluded, “the acceptance on the part of the girl of almost any invitation needs little explanation when one realizes that she often goes pleasureless unless she does accept ‘free treats’.” (54)

Gender stereotypes played a critical role in determining what types of work women could do; working-class women learned that flirtation could facilitate success on the job. Women’s working identities were bound up with their sexual identities:

The culture of treating was reinforced in the workplace through women’s interactions with employers, male workmates, and customers, particularly in service or sales jobs. In department stores, managers were said to advise shopgirls to find gentlemen friends who could buy them the clothing and trinkets that their salaries could not cover. At a government hearing, one saleswoman testified: “One of the employers has told me, on a \$6.50 wage, he don’t care where I get my clothes from as long as I have them, to be dressed to suit him.” Some investigators denied the accuracy of these reports but their widespread currency among saleswomen suggest the tacit legitimacy of treating as a means of gaining access to the world of amusements. Waitresses knew that suggestive familiarity with male customers often brought good tips, and some used their skills and opportunities to engage in an active social life with chance acquaintances. “Most of the girls quite frankly admit making ‘dates’ with strange men,” observed a Consumer’s League study. “These dates are made with no thought on the part of the girl beyond getting the good time which she cannot afford herself.” These working women sought a way



to negotiate dependency and claim some choice, autonomy, and pleasure in otherwise dreary lives. They understood, albeit hazily, that leisure was the realm in which that quest could most easily be achieved. (54–55)

Several things are significant about Peiss's discussion of "treating" and her selection of citations from the New York Factory Investigating Commission. Peiss is discussing very early twentieth-century New York. In Peiss's passage, there is an allusion to a distinction, which becomes increasingly categorical, between the girls who care about their reputation and the girls who make dates with strange men in order to have a good time. Secondly, there is an emphasis on passive language: the repetition of the word "accept" in the Commission transcripts and in Peiss's own description suggests a desire to displace responsibility in these transactions. And perhaps this reflects a reality that not only were women seen as the passive figure in all interactions, but they also took pains to construct their behavior in terms of moral norms acceptable for American daughters. Curiously, even when Peiss allows that the "working women sought a way to negotiate dependency and claim some choice, autonomy, and pleasure" she undercuts this willfulness with hazy understanding, thereby establishing the women essentially as half-wits. Whether the women understood the larger social and economic implications of accepting gifts, they most likely understood the terms of each transaction. Reputation and autonomy are key elements for studying the development of the gold digger.

The urban setting with its faster pace requires an expedient shorthand for the multitude of interactions that can occur on any given day, and the language of the city, the woman adrift learns, is money or its signs. Only in the city, with its myriad opportunities for display can the gold digger make efficient use of her talent as master advertiser. The gold digger could gain access to posh locales without economic capital but she required symbolic capital to enter these places and attract the economic capital (the sugar daddy): “[e]conomic capital and symbolic capital are so inextricably intertwined that the display of material and symbolic strength represented by prestigious affines is in itself likely to bring in material profits” (Bourdieu, *Logic* 119). The gold digger frequently made use of a form of symbolic capital recognized as a traditionally feminine semiotic system: “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....In a certain sense fashion gives woman a compensation for her lack of position in a class based on a calling or profession” (Simmel, *Fashion* 551). The writings of German sociologist Georg Simmel between the 1880s and early 1900s elucidate the theories and tactics of economic reification in modern capitalism. Fashion becomes more important in such a society as a signifier; it compacts and displays socioeconomic qualities:

t]he man who has become absorbed in a calling has entered a relatively uniform class, within which he resembles many others....he is invested with the full importance and the objective as well as social power of his class. To his individual importance is added that of his class, which often covers the defects and deficiencies of his purely personal character. The individuality of the class often supplements or replaces that of the member. This identical thing fashion accomplishes with other means. Fashion 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. (Simmel, *Fashion* 551–52).

In his text of 1913, *Luxury and Capitalism*, German theorist Werner Sombart offers a historical explanation for the importance of clothing in women's economic identities. Sombart suggests that women not only made use of the signs of clothing but their use was a pivotal factor in directing economies to utilize and trade with more elaborate and concrete signs of display:

Formerly, luxury extended merely to providing feasts and entertainment...Now, [servants and such activities]...were only the concomitant of the steadily growing use of objects in the display of luxury. It was ... woman who was the guiding spirit in the movement toward objectification...She could derive only scant satisfaction from the display of a resplendent retinue. Rich dresses, comfortable houses, precious jewels were more tangible. This change is exceedingly significant economically. Adam Smith would have said that this trend constituted a passing from "unproductive" to "productive" luxury since the former, i.e., personal luxury, was "productive" (in the capitalistic sense) because it gave employment to "productive" hands in a (capitalistic) enterprise...the objectification of luxury has been of fundamental significance for the genesis of capitalism. (95)

While Sombart's analysis relies on traditional dichotomies that construct men as abstract, intellectual thinkers and women as earthy and practical, requiring tangible

proofs, it indicates a belief that women and men had different relationships to semiotic systems and that this affected their respective positions in any economy. Sombart's assertions may not be applicable to women in general but they posit a historical example for the gold digger's emphasis on gifts that have visual reference. Significantly, in the early twentieth century, women were linked with the shift from a production-based economy to a consumption-based economy. Although this may seem to contradict Sombart's theory, both conceptions suggest the intimate relationship of women's behavior with economic change and the elision of women with commodity. Women in particular, Rita Felski points out in her exploration of gender issues in modernity, were "depicted as object...[and] could only attain the status of an active agent in relation to other objects" (65).

The gold digger can also be studied in relation to the courtesan but what does it mean to be a modernized courtesan? How are the "services" rendered by the gold digger determined by conditions of consumer-oriented culture? For that matter, what are the services rendered by the gold digger, and how are these services affected by supply and demand of the capitalist market? Why is the gold digger typically (though not exclusively) remunerated in luxury gifts? What do this type of payment and this kind of transaction signify in the modern economy? Werner Sombart's discussion of the courtesan as a crystallizing factor of luxury capitalism indicates that the context in which the gold digger emerges has notable similarities to that of the courtesan.

Sombart treats the fact that commercialized love “finds its best markets in the large cities” ( 51) as obvious, as both parties in such a transaction involve themselves in amorous, interactive shopping. Sombart also insists that “[i]t is of particular significance for the formation of the type of modern courtesan that, at the turn of the sixteenth century, women appeared on the stage of Paris theaters...Now, at last, this era had a substitute for the glamour which had surrounded the Renaissance cocotte, herself emulating the hetaera of antiquity; the theater provided the nimbus, which seems to be so essential for free love relations on a higher level” (55). While the gold digger might never be as erudite as the courtesan is in her art, she acquires her “nimbus,” her aura of allure, from the glamour created around her image by the collaborative forces of cinema and consumerism.

The gold digger differs from the prostitute and the courtesan not only through her defining mobility within class structure or field but also in that her existence is linked to the emergence and strengthening of a large middle class. The courtesan is tied to extreme wealth and status; wealth, for the gold digger, is a more relative function. Whereas the prostitute is a figure irrevocably tied to the street and to squalid conditions, to anonymous exchanges, to a life as an object for the men who want nothing but to purchase a random encounter, the gold digger thrives and capitalizes on her position of visibility within a culture that is increasingly visually cued. The courtesan, at the opposite end of the spectrum from the prostitute in terms of class and

financial status, shares with the prostitute the necessity of conducting her business affairs in private. The courtesan remains a symbol of a luxurious, decadent lifestyle, of financial and sexual excess. However the courtesan, like the gold digger, disrupts dichotomous classifications of women as virtuous or vampy. Sombart marks as particularly important, “especially for the development of our external culture...the circumstance that with the spread of illegitimate love, love for its own sake, a new class of woman appeared and took a position between the ‘respectable woman’ and the *putain*” (51). In early twentieth-century America, the gold digger also functions to deconstruct the boundaries of good girl/bad girl constructions: among gold digging women adrift, the period’s “[o]bservant reformers discovered a spectrum of behavior between the chastity that they preferred and the sexual slavery they decried, a spectrum that further blurred the line between pure and fallen” (Meyerowitz 124). The gold digger’s creation of this new habitus has greater implications for social mobility than those afforded the courtesan. The gold digger is not elevated in the same way as the courtesan, but she has access to middle-class lifestyle. The gold digger that I am discussing is peculiarly American; she embodies the desire and frenzy, the vulgarity and glamour of an evolving brand of capitalism. Reactions to her are revealing of emotional responses to economic excess. She represents the American tension between the Puritan heritage of restraint and the United States’

embrace of advertising's encouragement of excessive spending.<sup>2</sup> She is a symbol of carefree pleasure as well as of guilt; she is celebrated in the moment of the party and later blamed and resented for the economic irresponsibility and failure.

Several sociologists, including Georg Simmel, Pierre Bourdieu, and Jean Baudrillard, discuss matrimonial strategies in relation to methods of transferring property and stabilizing cultural positions. These theories and interpretations provide a framework to a discussion of gold digging because of the relationships they suggest between sex, work, property, and social interaction, and the work they do at elucidating and excavating connections between women's relationships and economic circumstance. Their usefulness, however, is limited because the sociological/anthropological texts are either describing a specific cultural and historical configuration in which the gold digger cannot figure, or they preclude the idea that non-marital interactions figure significantly in the cultural economy. However, these gaps and omissions are provocative as they prompt questions about how the gold digger's intervention into these functions would affect and be affected by them. I have used several of these theories as background while recognizing

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<sup>2</sup> Warren Susman gives an interesting account of the attack on Puritanism in the early twentieth century. Part of Susman's argument is that Puritanism stood for different things in the ongoing debate. It was both weapon and target, depending on the position of those in the debate and what the possible gains were. The Puritan ethic actually supported "vibrant modern capitalism" (42) in some of its tenets but the Puritan past became a symbol of stagnation when it came to consumerism. It developed into a "bulwark, a mythical defense of the status quo, that those who wished to see a new and different America felt they must begin by the destruction of this image of the past" (44).

Gayle Rubin's warning that there is "an economics and a politics to sex/gender systems" which tend to be "obscured by the concept of 'exchange of women'" (Rubin 205). The gold digger both reinforces and subverts the exchange of women. The presence of the gold digger in the modern economy necessitates a change in sumptuary laws and exposes the assumptions on which they are founded.

Thorstein Veblen's notorious *The Theory of the Leisure Class* provides an American treatment of several of the themes discussed by Simmel—how laws and norms of expenditure function in a modernizing economy. Veblen's study, published in 1899, focuses on a phenomenon that he dubs conspicuous consumption, recognizing how important the visual economy will become to the financial economy. Not only can apparent consumption maintain or raise status; the consumption of appearances becomes an efficacious economic practice. Veblen also emphasizes that this consumption should be vicarious. This notion of vicarious consumption holds particular relevance for the gold digger. The focus throughout *The Theory of the Leisure Class* is on the role of wife in conspicuous-vicarious consumption:

...as the latter-day outcome of this evolution of an archaic institution, the wife, who was at the outset the drudge and chattel of the man, both in fact and in theory—the producer of goods for him to consume—has become the ceremonial consumer of goods he produces. But she still quite unmistakably remains his chattel in theory; for the habitual rendering of vicarious leisure and consumption is the abiding mark of the unfree servant. (69)



In 1899 the burden of consuming visibly fell to wives. By 1919, there was an additional figure helping businessmen, bankers, managers and other middle-class males waste their hard-earned money in spectacular style: the gold digger. Veblen's theory re-orientes economic emphasis from production to consumption. By presenting the act of consuming visibly as an economic function, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* paves the way for the gold digger to conceptualize her life of parties and gift acquisition in terms of a career, or at least a job. Although Veblen's emphasis on conspicuous consumption prophesied the direction of twentieth-century expenditure, his study must be considered as a product of its historical moment. Veblen sees conspicuous consumption and conspicuous leisure as related but he still essentially treats them separately. Significantly, the one realm in which they blur is that of fashionable clothing:

...the function of dress as an evidence of ability to pay does not end with simply showing that the wearer consumes valuable goods in excess of what is required for physical comfort. Simple conspicuous waste of goods is effective and gratifying as far as it goes; it is good *prima facie* evidence of pecuniary success, and consequently *prima facie* evidence of social worth. But dress has subtler and more far-reaching possibilities than this crude, first-hand evidence of wasteful consumption only. If, in addition to showing that the wearer can afford to consume freely and uneconomically, it can also be shown in the same stroke that he or she is not under the necessity of earning a livelihood, the evidence of social worth is enhanced in a very considerable degree. (Veblen 120)

Veblen's discussion of clothing, while recognizing the powerful potential of sartorial culture, relies on a fairly simple logic that is rapidly undercut and re-shaped

by the growth of mass-produced, cheap clothing. Although these factory creations likely were never mistaken for *haute couture* by members of Veblen's leisure class—the upper and upper middle classes—they facilitated a new use for fashion-play among classes who did work for their living. Work, and the social life that accompanied it, provided a new arena for conspicuous consumption and new participants (allowing for a stratified system of such). There were many girls like “Yeddie Bruker, a factory worker earning seven dollars a week [who] spent almost two dollars of that on clothing and four dollars on room and board” (Peiss 53). The increased availability and exposure of fashionable styles contributed to consumer *desires*. There is in Veblen's text very little sense of the great and giddy plethora of consumer products that would make conspicuous consumption into leisure in the twentieth century. The intersections of conspicuous consumption and economic dependence become complicated as the reasons for consuming do. Veblen does not overtly acknowledge that advertising's greatest sell was to make the consumer into an active agent—making choices—and that many consumers not only bought the concept but purchased identities as well. These are developments that crystallize over the first twenty years of the century, and without which, the gold digger could not exist.

## 2 A Spotlight of One's Own (and a fur coat a year) *Sister Carrie* and the Gold Digger *Naissante*

The title character of *Sister Carrie* is significant to my study of gold diggers in the twenties through the forties. Carrie is a prototype of Anita Loos's, Dawn Powell's and Dashiell Hammett's gold diggers. A discussion of the factors essential to the gold digger's formation in relation to the progress of the main character of Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*, published in 1900, illustrates the conditions and changes within society that enabled the gold digger to take her particular configuration.<sup>3</sup> Her position in the gold digger tradition that I am tracing is that of a

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<sup>3</sup> In the novel *Sister Carrie*, Carrie Meeber steps out of the train that has carried her from her small town to the modern, industrial metropolis that is Chicago and immediately attracts the attention of Drouet, a traveling salesman who impresses her enough to get the address where she will be staying. She is financially and psychologically unprepared for city living, having only four dollars and a tentative, awkward manner. She quickly finds the restrictions imposed by her brother-in-law on her movements and spending oppressive and learns how difficult it is to find work when one lacks experience and appropriate clothing. When she does get work, it is menial; she finds it tedious and badly paid, and her co-workers crude. Within days, Drouet contacts her, and, physically exhausted and emotionally constrained, she finds his proposals of new clothes and a comfortable place to live appealing. She quickly assumes the position of Drouet's kept woman, believing that Drouet will marry her eventually and that her loss of honor is temporary. She passes her time admiring the houses and fashions of the Drouet's wealthier acquaintances. One of Drouet's friends, Hurstwood, who can offer Carrie more refined benefits, takes a romantic interest in Carrie. After Carrie gives a noted performance in amateur theater, Hurstwood's desire to have Carrie for himself grows, and he finds himself making false promises of marriage and legitimacy. Drouet leaves her and Carrie finds herself duped by Hurstwood; she pursues employment in the theater. Hurstwood becomes obsessed with Carrie and devises a scheme to trick her into going away with him. They settle in New York, where Hurstwood buys a partnership in an unsuccessful bar, and Carrie Meeber becomes Carrie Madenda, rising from chorus girl to show principal, and garnering favorable press as well as countless fans and gift-bestowing admirers. Carrie leaves Hurstwood, moves in with another chorus girl and soon is installed in a glamorous suite at a posh hotel. Hurstwood, meanwhile, progresses downwards.

gold digger *naissante*. There is a roughness throughout *Sister Carrie*—a roughness of character and style—that contrasts with the smooth surfaces of Anita Loos's *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, written twenty-five years later. This roughness, which often takes the form of stylistic strain or lumpiness, does not strike the reader as modern; however, the novel seems to be unable to develop into the roundness of nineteenth century descriptive fullness. The language quite often seems to hurl itself upon its object without quite reaching it. The description of Carrie's search for work in one of the department stores provides an example: "Some time she spent in wandering up and down, thinking to encounter the buildings by chance, so readily is the mind, bent upon prosecuting a hard but needful errand, eased by the self-deception which that semblance of search, without the reality, gives" (Dreiser, *Carrie* 26). The language suggests Carrie's obviously uneasy state of mind, intensified by her hunger, but it also reflects the text's larger discomfort with modernization, emphasizing turn-of-the-century society's uncertainty about the impact on society of women working in the public sphere. This discomfort is a feature of the novel as a whole as it reflects society's concern and unease about the possible effects of commodification on morals and personal relationships.

The gold digger problematizes traditional conceptions of seduction. Implicit in the term gold digger is activity. To be a gold digger one must do more than passively accept what is offered—one must seek material wealth and like their

namesakes of the gold rush, take risks, encounter adventures to achieve it. Carrie's status as an active gold digger is somewhat ambiguous in the text. By 1925, the time Dreiser publishes *An American Tragedy*, women are seen as possessing more agency and responsibility in making sexual choices. The protagonist Clyde Griffiths compares his sister, who has been deceived and impregnated by her lover, to the gold digger he desires, Hortense Briggs, and, significantly, his sister does not appear in his eyes as a blameless victim:

For had Esta known more of the man in whom she was interested, more of what such a relationship with him meant, she would not be in her present pathetic plight. Certainly such girls as Hortense Briggs, Greta and Louise, would never have allowed themselves to be put in any such position as Esta. Or would they? They were too shrewd. And by contrast with them in his mind, at least at this time, she suffered. *She ought, as he saw it, to have been able to manage better.* (Dreiser, *Tragedy* 100)

The implication is that the modern girl who knows about sex and modes of contraception is more admirable than the innocent, gullible woman-as-child. Lack of sexual knowledge no longer establishes a woman as definitively feminine—it establishes her as unsophisticated, unnecessarily vulnerable, and unsuited to modern living.

Dreiser's novel enters into discussion with other texts of the period concerning the effects of commodification on identity. 1903 is the year that Georg Simmel published his first version of *The Philosophy of Money*, which compiled several articles and lectures that he had been working on for at least ten years.

Simmel's sociological writing shares with Dreiser's fiction an attentive treatment to the concept of subjectivity in the modern money economy. The resonance of themes between these two texts suggests a palpable tension in society about what and how money will signify in terms of individual subjectivity. Georg Simmel, in *The Philosophy of Money*, elaborates a theory of modern economic relations that illuminates that imbalance. He develops the idea of what could be called economic modernism—the idea that in a modern money economy because of the proliferation of goods for sale, one becomes aware of the instability of value. One realizes that there is no absolute value, that exchange values are constantly shifting. A modern money economy supports a relativistic world view; it emphasizes “the unique significance that exchange, as the economic-historical realization of the relativity of things, has for society; exchange raises the specific object and its significance for the individual above its singularity, not into the sphere of abstraction, but into that of lively interaction which is the substance of economic value” (Simmel, *Money* 101).

When value is divorced from the inherent nature of a thing, from a thing's essence, spaces for play open:

Only the incorporation of the single object in diversified production and in many-sided exchange movements suggests that its economic significance lies in its relation to other objects and is reciprocal; and this coincides with the growth of a money economy. That the meaning of the economic object is constituted by this relativity, and that the significance of money is to become the clear expression of this relativity, are facts that come to be realized by their reciprocal influence.... there may be, indeed, a just price for a

commodity, but only as the expression of a definite, well-adjusted exchange relationship between this commodity and all others, and not as a consequence of the nature of the commodity itself or the amount of money itself, which stand in no relation to each other and have no reference to the just or the unjust. (Simmel, *Money* 127)

The gold digger learns to capitalize on the relativity of values. Like the thousands who played the stock markets in the twenties to get rich, the gold digger gambles and trades on fluctuating values. The gold digger is, in fact, a liminal figure for twentieth-century consumer culture because she engages directly the tension between subject and object in female identity upon which the modern economy comes to depend. It is, in part, the gold digger's extreme sensitivity to fluctuations in the economic conditions, that make her both worthy of study and neglected. Her curse is that she is part of this world of disposable commodities, tied to trends and the practice of following fashion; she appears most often in popular texts.

One way gold diggers are continuously linked to the popular discourse of commodity culture, which becomes increasingly merged with the discourse of advertising, is through their highly symbolic yet practical relationship with clothing. Central to Carrie's position as a prototype in my theorization of the gold digger tradition is her almost maniacal obsession with clothing. Dreiser has emphasized the importance of fashion with the title of two chapters: "THE LURE OF THE MATERIAL: Beauty Speaks for Itself" and "THE PERSUASION OF FASHION: Feeling Guards o'er its own." The chapter titles are not only a key to the allegorical

intentions of the text, they are also slightly philosophical, albeit in an ethical sense.

Fashion and the material world assume the structure of external forces that might

beckon and act upon the helpless. Carrie can be viewed as one such victim of the

love of dress. Carrie's dalliance through a department store suggests a journey down

the proverbial primrose path:

Carrie passed along the busy aisles, much affected by the remarkable displays of trinkets, dress goods, stationery, and jewelry. Each separate counter was a showplace of dazzling interest and attraction. She could not help feeling the claim of each trinket and valuable upon her personally... There was nothing there which she could not have used—nothing which she did not long to own. The dainty slippers and stockings, the delicately frilled skirts and petticoats, the laces, ribbons, haircombs, purses, all touched her with individual desire, and she felt keenly the fact that not any of these things were in the range of her purchase. (Dreiser, *Carrie* 26)

Clothing becomes a moral issue for Carrie. The coincidence of Carrie's moral and physical vanity brings into relief an important feature of the gold digger's view of the world and of herself within it. Carrie subconsciously translates her *desire* for fine clothing into a *need* for fine clothing, not, however, without mirroring the fall. Kathy Peiss builds on anecdotal evidence from turn-of-the-century New York to support an equation between love of fine clothes and re-evaluation of moral values for working-class women:

Indeed, imitation of 'ladies of leisure' might involve admiring the style of prostitutes as well as socialites....much of the appearance of twentieth-century women, including their use of make-up and wigs, was common among prostitutes before becoming accepted by 'respectable' females. In the promiscuous spaces of the streets, theaters, and dance halls, prostitutes



provided a cultural model both fascinating and forbidden to other young working-class women. Tantalized by the fine dress, easy life, sexual expressiveness, and apparent independence, while carefully marking the boundary between the fallen and respectable, a working woman might appropriate parts of the prostitute's style as her own. (65)

While Peiss qualifies her assertion by insisting that working-class women observed the "boundary between the fallen and the respectable," I am suggesting that the gold digger—perhaps functioning as a kind of fusion between the upstanding working-class girl and the prostitute—blurs this boundary and adapts on the cultural model of the prostitute, by creating her own "leisure" practices and her own moral code. The increasing importance that Carrie attaches to clothing demonstrates the economic logic of the gold digger, a figure who takes for granted that she should have fine clothes, who views her clothing as a tool or investment.

The importance of fashion as a function of class mobility or status stability for women is discussed by Georg Simmel in his essay "Fashion," cited earlier, but he also outlines the significance of clothing to the individual ego and laboring subject in *The Philosophy of Money*. Clothing is perhaps the most portable of property, after money, and therefore is a most modern symbol of the money economy's constant flux and movement. According to Simmel,

. . .the personality expresses, reveals, and expands itself in possession. To understand the concept of property it is decisive to recognize that the rigid demarcation between it and the self, between internal and external life, is quite superficial and that it should be made more fluid for the purpose of a deeper interpretation. (322)

Simmel goes further to delineate that certain properties are more expressive of the self than others:

. . .tools function most directly as extensions of the limbs . . . The activity factor present in owning tools is greater than for other possessions and therefore, *next to the body*, they are the possession that is most carefully incorporated into the Ego.... objects must enter into the Ego, just as the Ego enters into objects. (emphasis mine) (323)

Simmel accepts that the body is a possession but does not here suggest the implications of this for women. His conception of tools is left somewhat vague but implies the instruments that are involved in physical labor. Simmel is primarily considering here the tools of “men’s work.” For the gold digger, clothes are her tools; not only can they assist in demonstrating her escort’s wealth<sup>4</sup> but they are also tools in the performative work of attracting and maintaining the benefactor-escort or sugar daddy’s interest. This dualistic purpose of clothing illustrates aptly the conflation of production and consumption in the gold digger’s practice and in the modern economy, in general. Not only does one have to “spend money to make money,” one has to *look* wealthy to become wealthy, particularly if one is a woman.

Sharon Hartman Strom, in her book *Beyond the Typewriter: Gender, Class, and the Origins of Modern American Office Work, 1900–1930*, suggests that any

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<sup>4</sup> A slight variation on Thorstein Veblen’s theory of conspicuous, vicarious consumption and the role of wife in it.

women's work that involved interaction with the public required certain standards of appearance. Femininity was an openly acknowledged qualification:

Employment agencies reiterated how important physical appearance and youth were for the women they tried to place. The ideal candidate for the more responsible positions in clerical work, they agreed, was a single, attractive woman in her twenties ....One placement bureau manager thought appearance was '100% important before all other qualifications....The prettier they are, the better their chances. (400)

Although Strom's analysis focuses on office workers, department stores would also emphasize appearance as key in their hiring practices. The contradictions in American attitudes to work and wealth had particularly complicated and confusing ramifications for women and women's identity. The woman who did not work but merely consumed using her husband's money clearly was still an ideal (as theorized by Veblen) but the women who were emerging *en masse* into the workplace were experiencing new levels of visibility for which they required the wardrobe. Strom suggests that many women used their careers as ways to get out of needing a career—to meet marriageable men. Marrying was still undisputedly the predominant means by which a woman could acquire wealth. The way working women get interpellated by consumer culture is a curious mixture of standards of ideal womanhood, held over from the Victorian era, and standards for working men roughly translated: the result is a confusing collection of contradictory standards and values.

Intersections of money and morals were not always clear. Simmel, writing in the late nineteenth century, emphasizes the fact that, in Europe, “[w]ealth ... is often regarded as a kind of moral merit, as is indicated by the term ‘respectability’ and by popular references to the well-to-do as ‘upright citizens’ or the ‘better-class public’” (217). This attitude gets complicated in the United States by the concept of the American work ethic and the emergence of peculiarly fanatical yet contradictory attitudes in American culture to the practices of work and leisure. The implication of the American dream mentality that proposes the idea that anyone who works hard enough can be successful is that anyone who is impoverished is lazy. American culture translates the idea of wealth as moral superiority into its own terms. Related to this is the idea that it is shameful to have money that is not earned unless of course you are a woman and the money is that of your husband. Carrie is sensitive that she may be implicated as immoral by this logic when she first accepts money from Drouet to purchase some new clothes:

She went over the tangle again and again....In the light of the way [her sister and brother-in-law] would look on her getting money without work, the taking of it now seemed dreadful. She began to be ashamed. The whole situation depressed her. It was all so clear when she was with Drouet. Now it was all so tangled, so hopeless – much worse than it was before, because she had the semblance of aid in her hand which she could not use. (Dreiser, *Carrie* 66)

Although Carrie does not exhibit an understanding of the hypocrisy created by the contradictory dictates regarding appearance and work, she certainly feels the full force of

its effect. In *American Beauty*, Lois Banner demonstrates the range of attitudes prevalent in nineteenth-century American thought that contributed to this culture of contradiction, although she does little work at actually chronicling how most women of the period tried to reconcile these beliefs in their practical lives. She points out that the “growth of fashion consciousness was in keeping with the rampant individualism, materialism, and search for status and success that were as much a part of basic American values as ...egalitarianism” (Banner 23). Banner also asserts that “by definition, a woman of fashion did not work” (24) but that the pursuit of fashion increased in its scope as women entered the workplace and other public spheres. Fashion was one way for the working woman to project the fantasy of wealth onto herself so that she might attract a wealthy enough husband to become a woman of fashion. Throughout the nineteenth century, proponents of dress reform “contended that women’s love of finery was a major motivation for prostitution” (Banner 91). In 1883, Elizabeth Linn Linton wrote that it was “the vague restlessness, the fierce extravagance, the neglect of home, the indolent fine-ladyism, the passionate love of pleasure which characterizes the modern woman” (quoted in Banner 26). What Linton may or may not have foreseen was that in the next century modern women might exhibit the same traits but that some of them would turn their enjoyment of these “indolent” and fashionable pleasures into a form of work-leisure, while laying claim to enough morality and class status to remain marriageable.

The gold digger, unlike the courtesan or the prostitute, is a product of the increasingly elastic delineations of class that characterized early twentieth-century America. She learns quickly how to construct her appearance to benefit from such elasticity—essentially how to advertise herself, to improve her economic and social situation. As advertising succeeds in establishing an invisible hegemonic logic of associating ideals, sentiments, and emotions with products, the concept of value becomes equivalent to market price. The struggle within Carrie to accept and incorporate within herself this mode of evaluating situations economically rather than morally symbolizes the struggle felt by American culture as a whole to accommodate this shift in perception. Carrie situates a significant point in the development of consumer culture as a structuring principle. She makes constant reference to the existence of something nobler, specifically in the realm of dramatic arts, where she believes feeling to be transcendent in its exquisite representation. The novel makes clear, however, that Carrie cannot separate herself from the identity she has fashioned for herself to a large extent out of material possessions. The notion of lifestyle and the fine clothes a lifestyle requires replace and repudiate traditional moral beliefs:

Seeing a thing, she would immediately set to inquiring how she would look, properly related to it....Fine clothes to her were a vast persuasion; they spoke tenderly and Jesuitically for themselves. When she came within earshot of their pleading, desire in her bent a willing ear....Once these things were in her hand, on her person, she might dream of giving them up; the method by which they came might intrude itself so forcibly that she would ache to be rid of the thought of it, but she would not give them up. "Put on the old clothes—that torn pair of shoes," was called to her by her conscience in vain. She could possibly have conquered the fear of hunger and gone back; the thought of hard work and a narrow round of suffering

would, under the last pressure of conscience, have yielded, but spoil her appearance? —be old-clothed and poor-appearing?—never! (Dreiser 99)

As material possessions become more closely allied to ego, goods acquire an unprecedented level of symbolic value in the field of social relations. The gold digger must constantly engage with the tension between goods as tokens of affection and as overdetermined signifiers that actually replace deeds and emotions. This is the gold digger's particular challenge and, if she is successful, her particular skill: to treat the gifts bestowed and lavished upon her as mere trinkets and baubles while they are, in fact, her wages and very much needed. The gold digger survives on luxuries—that is, luxuries are her basics. Her practice works within an inversion of the logic of what is excess, decadent expenditure, while her very existence addresses the gaps between excess and scarcity.

The idea that the realms of work and relationships intersect and overlap is one that has remained inexplicably taboo throughout the twentieth century. At the very end of the century, Western culture is still trying to control and minimize the practice of office romance, of dating co-workers. Given the dissolution of public and private as separate realms that can be contained, the interpenetration of work and romance seems inevitable. Eva Illouz examines the discourse of romance articles in late twentieth-century women's magazines and repeatedly finds advice for relationships couched in economic and utilitarian metaphors. Women are constantly urged to make

relationships “work,” to “negotiate” with their romantic partners, and to “invest” in a romance. Such linguistic equations are neither subversive nor unusual; they are, in fact, commonplace, having acquired the force of subconscious ideological rhetoric throughout the twentieth century (Illouz). They are uttered so frequently in psychological and pseudo-psychological discourse that the significance of their logic is rarely questioned. There remains reluctance, however, for individuals and media to acknowledge the presence of the third party of economics in a relationship as anything other than deviant or superficial. Simmel touches upon this contradiction of capitalist society in his elaboration on money: “the person who is interested solely in money is ... unable to comprehend why he [or she] is reproached with callousness and brutality, since he is aware of the logical consistency and pure impartiality of his behaviour but not of any bad intentions” (Simmel, *Money* 434).

Simmel goes on to examine the way culture has chosen to define such people:

Language, with fine instinctive subtle insight, interprets a ‘calculating’ person simply as one who ‘calculates’ in an *egotistic* sense . . . the money economy enforces the necessity of continuous mathematical operations in our daily transactions. The lives of many people are absorbed by such evaluating, weighing, calculating and reducing of qualitative values to quantitative ones. (444)

In *Sister Carrie*, one of Carrie’s benefactors makes himself vulnerable to her

because she does not appear calculating: “In the mild light of Carrie’s eyes was nothing of the calculation of the mistress. In the difficult manner was nothing of the art of the courtesan” (Dreiser 119). These two traits, calculation and art, are central to the practice of the gold digger. The gold digger is, in effect, a combination of



girlfriend and mistress, a figure who will not be kept secret and indeed, whose strength and market value relies on her public appearance. Carrie, however, marks an interesting point in the development of the gold digger. Carrie is constantly calculating and performing throughout the novel. For her these activities are not a game; her strategies are a combination of instinctive modes of survival and acquired normative feminine behaviors—her life and her livelihood. The gold diggers in Loos's and Powell's novels might seem to have more fun than Carrie but their nights out on the town in the pleasure spaces of nightclubs and restaurants are also making serious business out of play. Carrie represents quite starkly and dramatically that to negotiate the modern urban terrain that is consumer culture one *must* be calculating and artful. Her first notice of Drouet is of "something promising in all the material prospect he set forth" (Dreiser, *Carrie* 11). Similarly, her first impression of Hurstwood is one constructed of material markers:

His clothes were particularly new and rich in appearance. The coat lapels stood out with that medium stiffness which excellent cloth possesses... What he wore did not strike the eye so forcibly as that which Drouet had on, but Carrie could see the elegance of the material. . . She noticed these things almost unconsciously. (Dreiser, *Carrie* 95)

That Dreiser makes Carrie's calculations and observations an almost unconscious process suggests that gold diggers are not villainous vamps but modern women who are seeking a way to negotiate an entrance and a space within the male dominated realm of exchange, perhaps in a less resourceful and creative manner than their

feminist contemporaries but in a way that is nonetheless significant to the study of changes in women's lives in this period.

Throughout *The Philosophy of Money*, Simmel uses the pronoun "he" as a generalized universal term. There are places, however, where his discussion seems particularly, though subtly, gendered. One such example occurs within his theorization of economics as structuring society: "... exchange is one of the functions that creates an inner bond between men – a society, in place of a mere collection of individuals. It is, therefore, a tautology to say that exchange brings about socialization: for exchange is a form of socialization" (175). Simmel's theory brings to mind the businessmen's clubs that were increasing in popularity in the first decades of the twentieth century and which are present in *Sister Carrie* as the "gentlemen Elks [who] knew the standing of one another [and] . . . had regard for the ability which could amass a small fortune, own a nice home, keep a barouche or carriage, perhaps, wear fine clothes, and maintain a good mercantile position" (Dreiser 167). There is a sense throughout the novel that men are making deals with each other, are spending money with one another to attain more money. And while there is most certainly a competitive spirit to this whole process there is also camaraderie. The novel implies that women are excluded from such relations. The text also suggests, however, that a gold digger's social value may be established through such relations. Carrie is first introduced to Hurstwood, her second sugar

daddy, by Drouet, her first, and the three spend several evenings together.

Hurstwood's desire for Carrie is conceived through his friendship/rivalry with

Drouet:

He envied him, and now, as he looked at the well-dressed, jolly salesman, whom he so much liked, the gleam of the rival glowed in his eye. He began to size up Drouet from the standpoints of wit and fascination. He began to look to see where he was weak. There was no disputing that, whatever he might think of him as a good fellow, he felt a certain amount of contempt for him as a lover. He could hoodwink him, all right...He ran on in thought, almost exulting, the while he laughed and chatted, and Drouet felt nothing. (Dreiser 105–06)

The language of the passage suggests that Hurstwood's feelings of friendship and rivalry for Drouet get translated into his desire for Carrie. The tone epitomizes the excitable competition that René Girard describes as a characteristic of triangular desire, when one person's jealousy "always contains an element of fascination with the insolent rival" (12). Jealousy gets created through the relation with the rival; it does not exist apart or outside from this relationship but is born out of an "irresistible impulse to desire what others desire...to imitate the desires of others" (Girard 12). For all of Carrie's personal graces and attractions, each suitor's attentions are stimulated by the other's presence: "the mediator's prestige is imparted to the object of desire and confers upon it an illusory value. Triangular desire is the desire which transfigures its object" (Girard 17). Although the object-figure is typically the

passive one in the triangle, Carrie uses the triangular construction as many other gold diggers do: to improve her material position.

Carrie reiterates that she needs to make a living, that her acceptance of gifts from these men is a matter of survival, but her protestations that she would choose hunger over spoiling her appearance and being “old-clothed and poor-appearing” illustrates that it *is* indeed a matter of ambition with Carrie. Carrie’s determination for betterment and distinction has implications for the practices of the other gold diggers in our study. The gold diggers’ “games” are not merely games but practices of economic negotiation. Gold diggers are mediating and intervening bodily in the system of exchange that exists between men. Luce Irigaray’s chapter “Women on the Market” in *This Sex Which is Not One* suggests that the legacy of a “sociocultural endogamy would ... forbid commerce *with* women. Men make commerce *of* them, but they do not enter into any exchanges *with* them” (172). The practice of gold digging, whether one views it as a depressing reality or not, is one form of entrance into this realm in which a woman can use her (sex) object status to manipulate market practices as (economic) subject. For the gold digger, however, neither position can be exclusive of the other. Even while she can circumvent this flow, disrupt the logic of this economy by demanding payment for herself, to herself, she must constantly maneuver within this dualistic space, and barter and trade on this dialectic of her identity. Carrie plays out this tension throughout the novel, struggling between

Drouet's attitude toward her as "his possession" (Dreiser, *Carrie* 176) as well as others' perception of her as "a toy ... a plaything" (Dreiser, *Carrie* 212) and her own view of herself as a working woman. One of Carrie's typically frustrating and never too lengthy searches for a job is revealing of the contradictions in her conception of work:

there was one change for the better [since her last job hunt]. *She knew that she had improved in appearance.* Her manner had vastly changed. Her clothes were becoming, and men – well-dressed men, some of the kind who before had gazed at her indifferently from behind their polished railings and imposing office partitions—now gazed into her face with a soft light in their eyes. In a way, she felt the power and satisfaction of the thing, but it did not wholly reassure her. She looked for nothing save what might come legitimately and without the appearance of special favor. She wanted something, but no man should buy her by false protestations or favor. *She proposed to earn her living honestly.* (Dreiser, *Carrie* 230, emphasis mine)

Although Carrie maintains that she will earn her money honorably, she evinces awareness in this passage that appearance is a factor in earning a position. She acknowledges that her beauty and dress are her greatest assets for earning a living. Although Carrie insists that she will earn her living honestly, she also displays here the knowledge that she can trade on her beauty. The passage presents Carrie as warring within herself over this "moral" issue. The reality of urban working-class women in the early 1900s was that most jobs available to them did not pay any person's "living." The indecently low wages were justified by the employers' blind assumption that all young working women lived within a family wherein there was a

principal wage-earner: "It profited employers to use this idealized version of the family economy to determine women's wages. Thus, a completed job search was a dubious success for many women adrift, for they continued to encounter the hardships of poverty after they had found jobs" (Meyerowitz 33). These conditions put women like Carrie in a double-bind. If an unskilled, unmarried woman living outside her family did not "suffer from visible hardship [she] risked accusations of immorality" (Meyerowitz 41). Joanne Meyerowitz cites an advice book from 1908 on the subject: "A girl who is obliged to earn her own living, cannot afford to do anything that will cause talk, and nothing generates gossip quicker than the fact that a girl spends more than she is known to make" (41). Not only has Carrie been shaped by discourses of moral propriety, she has been made sensitive to the signs of respectability.

That Carrie develops a successful career as an actress links her in numerous ways with the other gold diggers in my study. The gold digger, like the prostitute or courtesan before her, is constantly associated with the actress or showgirl. However, important changes in the actress's value, status and reputation between the 1880s and the flourishing of Hollywood mirror important differences between the gold digger and her predecessors. Carrie is attracted to the idea of making a career out of making herself into spectacle, something she, like many other women, had already been practicing in public and in private:

How often had she looked at the well-dressed actresses on the stage and wondered how she would look, how delightful she would feel if only she were in their place. The glamor, the tense situation, the fine clothes, the applause, these had lured her until she felt that she, too, could act—that she, too, could compel acknowledgment of power. Now she was told that she really could—that little things she had done about the house had made even [Drouet] feel her power. It was a delightful sensation while it lasted....As usual, imagination exaggerated the possibilities for her. It was as if he had put fifty cents in her hand and she had exercised the thoughts of a thousand dollars....Her mind delighted itself with scenes of luxury and refinement, situations in which she was the cynosure of all eyes, the arbiter of all fates....Thoughts of all the charming women she had seen in plays—every fancy, every illusion which she had concerning the stage—now came back as a returning tide after the ebb. (Dreiser, *Carrie* 151)

For Carrie, this fantasy becomes to some extent a reality. There were thousands of working-class women seeking just such opportunities for glamour and fame, entertaining just such fantasies. Lois Banner suggests that to distinguish themselves from the thousands of other show girls<sup>5</sup> some ambitious women did probably use “sexual relations with directors and managers to advance their careers” (Banner 183). They also sought publicity in the media and did unusual things to be noticed: Carrie’s review in the *Evening World* which advises readers ““If you wish to be merry, see Carrie frown “” (Dreiser, *Carrie* 412) sets Carrie’s success in motion. Many showgirls did outrageous things in nightspots to get notice. While the woman adrift might seek anonymity to erase the signs of her dalliances, the gold digger craves visibility. It is worthwhile to discuss the relative positions of the actress and the gold digger in the cultural field of the first thirty years of the twentieth century. Whether or

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<sup>5</sup> Banner notes that in New York, there were approximately ten thousand unemployed chorus girls in 1904; according to the *New York World*, for every opening sixty thousand women applied.

not all actresses are gold diggers<sup>6</sup>, all gold diggers are, in some sense, actresses. In the first few years of the twentieth century, “that the chorus girl was basically a working woman was central to all the publicity about her.” This emphasis on her cultural background was “intended partly to counter the criticism of her supposedly libertine lifestyle—a charge that might inhibit attendance at her performances” (Banner 182). Although there had been for many years such illustrious and renowned actresses as Sarah Bernhardt,

[w]hat was new was that essentially minor performers, the members of the chorus, were staking a claim to public fame and were succeeding. In the process they were broadening even further what had long been the importance of the actress as a moulder of women’s values. And essentially what the actress—and the chorus girl – represented was a new modern concept of womanhood, one that involved independence, sexual freedom, and an enterprising, realistic attitude toward a career. Actresses showed American women a new sexual and personal style. They parlayed their popularity into salaries greater than those of most male actors and even of business executives and professionals. They inhabited a world of sensuality and pleasure, where men and women were not afraid to indulge themselves in the latest dances, the latest songs, the latest fashions. (Banner 183–84)

Although there remained a specter of corruption and dissolution around the actress and showgirl, the burgeoning popularity and economic success of the entertainment industry, and particularly that of the industry that was Hollywood, allowed some actresses to be millionaires in their own right.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> This attitude is reflected in the “Gold Diggers” series of plays and films popular between 1920 and 1935.

<sup>7</sup> Marjorie Rosen writes that by 1917 Mary Pickford “was commanding \$350,000 a year plus bonuses, and her star and her salary were still rising” (35)



Whether or not these women possessed cultural capital, they most certainly wielded a great deal of economic capital. One might say that the development of twentieth-century American culture has been about the steady usurpation and absorption of “cultural capital” by financial capital, or perhaps the continuous effacement of any boundary between the two categories. The gold diggers that I will discuss in the next three chapters embody the tension between these two assets and inhabit spaces that function as microcosms of the American practice of spectacular consumption. But is acting the only artistic endeavor women could access in this period to negotiate a position within the cultural economy? What effects does the film industry’s practice in this era of “constructing star-like personalities for their women writers” to allay public anxieties about what “all these career girls were up to” (Francke 22) on notions of women’s artistic work and women’s work, in general? How do female writers negotiate entrance into a male-dominated realm of exchange with their texts about gold diggers? What are the implications of Anita Loos and Dawn Powell using these women who use men to achieve their own success? And how are the characterizations of their gold diggers affected by the writers’ own identities as female laborers?

### 3 “Lady” Lorelei’s Lovers *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* and the Fashioning of a Legend

With the phrase “gentlemen prefer blondes,” Anita Loos linguistically registered hair color as a form of cultural currency in 1925. The phrase, better recognized today than the novel that coined it, has come to represent an American ideal. Although the blonde woman continues to be a favorite subject of parody—the inspiration for an entire category of jokes—she continues to be a cultural force.<sup>8</sup>

Although it is clear that many who use the phrase or wax on bloneness have never read the novel but those three words continue to be tossed around and carry meaning. In the summer of 1999, a Canadian magazine for twenty-something women debuted, calling itself *Blonde*, subtitled “a state of mind.” The editors explain that their title is tongue-in-cheek and playful. They assert that “Every woman at some point in her life has wanted to be blonde....Being blonde is about youth, vitality, beauty, energy and fun (6).” A quiz reveals what type of blonde you are (society, girl next door, beach, or bimbo). The back cover runs an ad for Amsterdam beer that calls the lager a “natural blonde” and “the blonde gentlemen prefer.” The magazine confronts bloneness as cultural phenomenon from a Canadian vantage—with privileged proximity to American media but enough ironic distance to attempt to unpack the meaning of

being blonde. A year earlier, a British magazine entitled *Minx*, “for girls with a lust for life,” published an article that suggested that anyone could be “a tall, skinny blonde,” that the phrase was code for the woman who is the “man-pleaser” and cited famous American blondes (Gwyneth Paltrow, Courtney Love) as examples.

Physical anthropologist Peter Frost of Laval University has proffered a biological explanation for the association of blondeness with femininity by insisting that women really are fairer-skinned, that is, they have less melanin and hemoglobin, than men (Sailer). Blondeness, however, is a culturally desirable quality because it evokes wealth.<sup>9</sup> Although the bleach blonde was not invented in the Jazz Age, the development and advertising of beauty services made the dyeing process more accessible. Not only does the blonde hue evoke gold or platinum, maintaining the color requires frequent and expensive salon visits. As well, cinematic-style lighting draws attention to the radiant lightness of the blonde. In the world of Anita Loos’s *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, blonde girls like Lorelei are the new currency. The gold

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<sup>8</sup> Or perhaps because the blonde does possess so much cultural capital, there is a need for de-emphasizing her power, labeling her a bimbo or dumb blonde, to mask the absurdity of the cultural attitude.

<sup>9</sup> In her article entitled “Gentlemen Consume Blondes,” on Howard Hawks’s musical film version of 1953, Maureen Turin raises the issue that as a sexual fetish of a society, the preference for blondes is racist. Indeed, issues of race are ignored in almost all these “gold digger texts”. In many ways, the character Helga Crane, in Nella Larsen’s novel *Quicksand* faces issues similar to those of the gold diggers studied in this thesis. As African-American culture was commercialized by and for white audiences in the period, sexualization of racial characteristics intensified. A reading of *Quicksand* in apposition to these texts would emphasize the racist construction that is submerged in the sexual economy.

digger is not just digging *for* gold; she is more often than not also physically a gold(en-haired) digger. The phrases “gentlemen prefer blondes” and “blondes have more fun,” today often quoted together in popular discourse, in fact reaffirm each other’s meaning in a capitalist, sexist culture—gentlemen prefer blondes because blondes have more fun and blondes have more fun because they are preferred by gentlemen, and therefore, get in to parties, get better service, get free things, and basically have more opportunities to have fun. Anita Loos’s novel suggests through its representation of the archetypal gold digger, Lorelei, how these values acquire economic reification.

Another twentieth-century aphorism is that money talks. But no one talks *about* money. Or, at least, money remains one of the last taboo subjects when it comes to self-revelation. Perhaps the most privately held information about a person is not quality or frequency of sexual relations, nor personal health, but one’s salary, bank account balance, and credit rating. This reluctance to divulge financial matters is curious, given the undisputed importance of the modern money economy in twentieth-century culture. But how does money communicate and what does it say? In *The Philosophy of Money*, Simmel writes about money as the ultimate shapeless substance. Money is so important in the modern socioeconomic realm because it is form, content and symbol, all in one. It can store and transport value as quickly as modern society demands with its unstable, constantly shifting definitions and beliefs.

Simmel writes that “...money is the expression and agent of the relationship that makes the satisfaction of one person always mutually dependent upon another person” (156). Money’s value then is relative and always connected to social interaction, while social interaction is, at some level in the modern economy, connected to money.

Anita Loos uses Lorelei Lee, her blonde gold digger in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*,<sup>10</sup> to bring to light the discourse behind economic interactions. Because mention of money is, in a sense, the last taboo, and yet so clearly a most influential element of twentieth century culture, developing a sophisticated and functioning set of signs to express money (wealth) becomes extremely important in the early

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<sup>10</sup> In *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, Lorelei Lee is encouraged by one of her many gentleman friends to keep a diary and record all her adventures. Lorelei juggles various retail magnates, authors, and European “aristocrats” in New York until one of her admirers sponsors her friend Dorothy and herself on a trip to Europe. In London, she finds that it is harder to “work” English men than American men. Her persistence pays off, however, and Sir Francis Beekman capitulates to her charms and buys her a valuable diamond tiara. Upon obtaining the prize, Lorelei and Dorothy, who has imprudently fallen in love with Gerald, a dancer, decide to investigate the opportunities for education and jewelry in Paris. Paris is “devine” except for the fact that Lady Beekman has followed them there to claim the tiara her husband gave Lorelei and that French men are so charming that they make a girl forget her purpose, which is profit. Lorelei and Dorothy also have their first encounter with fake jewelry, which they use to deter Lady Beekman from the real gems with the help of the two French men Lady Beekman has hired. The girls head into central Europe on the Orient Express and meet on the train Henry Spoffard, who is from a very wealthy American family and is famous for his role in censoring plays. Lorelei passes the journey trying to convince Mr. Spoffard of her old-fashioned values and experimenting with kronens in tipping the porter to determine the currency’s value. In Vienna, Lorelei is pronounced by Freud to be completely lacking in inhibitions, meets Mrs. Spoffard, and receives a marriage proposal from Henry, which she pores over like a business merger. When Lorelei returns to New York, she decides to marry Henry but not before she has her “debut.” She throws herself a decidedly ungenteel “coming out” which goes on for days without running dry. Lorelei proceeds with her wedding plans but quickly decides that she should not waste her brains and starts work in the movies.

twentieth century. Pronounced by “Dr. Froyd” to be completely uninhibited, Lorelei is the consummate vehicle for engaging the money taboo. Although we might imagine that Lorelei knows something about transgressing sexual taboo, as well, her diary is silent on those kinds of details. The popularity of Freud’s theories, though often misinterpreted, in the United States in the twenties, made sex into a matter for public consumption. Sex was acquiring new levels of importance as a social tactic—often manifesting itself as provocative innuendo and cocktail chatter—as well as an effective selling stratagem:

As Americans became possessed by sex and the connotations thereof, as seen in advertisements, pornography, conversation, dress, looks, and arts, a paradox developed in that they became more inhibited in the light of serious thought particularly linked with discussion. This ambiguity made mutual trust difficult. One was not sure whether the participating discussant was advancing a form of seduction physically (or vicariously) or on the other hand seriously projecting impersonal thoughts for dissolving the sexual problem in question. (Von Tresckow Napp 177).

It is a delectable irony, therefore, that when Americans en masse are volubly misunderstanding each other’s sexual repartee, Lorelei declares herself old-fashioned and evades commenting directly on the matter.<sup>11</sup> Anita Loos’s novel had, in H.L.

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<sup>11</sup> In *But Gentlemen Marry Brunettes*, Lorelei, now a married woman, does describe the sex life of her best friend Dorothy in detail, as she is writing Dorothy’s biography. This novella is perhaps a more comprehensive satire of Americans’ misinterpretation of Freudian theory. Lorelei would have to include details in a modern, Freudian style biography because sex is thought to reveal personality and the forces that shaped that individual’s personality. In *But Gentlemen Marry Brunettes*, Lorelei continues her work in film but takes a few moments to furnish Henry with a kid, the financial value of which she expects to reap perpetually. She attempts to penetrate the circle of the Algonquin hotel wits, and decides that her next literary project is the story of Dorothy’s life. She narrates the woe of

Mencken's words, "made fun of sex, which has never been done before in this grand and glorious nation of ours."

The apparent logic of the two titles of the classic and its sequel as a response to each other is also a joke. The statement "Gentlemen prefer blondes but gentlemen marry brunettes" may be true but not in its most obvious sense. While the titles do describe their respective texts, Dorothy's marriage causes her more grief than pleasure, and Lorelei maintains her prestigious marriage while continuing to be preferred by all kinds of gentlemen, such as Mr. Ernest Boyd. The apparent idea that men date and have fun with blondes but settle down and respect brunettes is not borne out by the progress of the two novels. Loos's manipulation of this expectation demands that the novels be read as undercutting such simple dichotomies of blonde/brunette, good girl/bad girl. As the gold digger negotiates for social mobility, she also erases many of the signposts that marked the differences between good girls from bad girls. The gold digger, in the tradition of the courtesan, influences and instigates trends among higher echelons of society. Werner Sombart, in his discussion of luxury finds that "[o]ne outgrowth of the new prominence of the elegant courtesan in social life was that bourgeois wives followed her example in style and

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Dorothy's early days as a child in a carnival company and then illustrates the mistakes Dorothy makes with men. After many men take advantage of Dorothy's generosity and good nature, Dorothy finally has a prospect of getting into the Social Register, with Lorelei's help, of course.

taste...the respectable lady had to adjust herself to competition with the mistress; the alternative was complete alienation from social life” (56). Sombart, writing in 1913, saw a similar path of influence at the time: “[a]ll the follies of fashion, luxury, splendor, and extravagance are first tried out by the mistresses before they are finally accepted, somewhat toned down, by the reputable matrons” (57). As respectable women in the 1910s and 1920s “proclaimed that they too were endowed with a sexuality personality,” by using aids to sexual attractiveness like cosmetics, and took on “themselves as potential wives all the characteristics of lovers...[t]he two kinds of women were no longer separate and distinguishable at first glance but one and the same” (Fass 284). Loos’s own mentor and inspiration, the caustic, influential American humorist of the period, H.L.Mencken, perhaps most remembered for calling middlebrow Americans, the “booboisie,” offers the counterpart to this concept in his book of contentious pronouncements and irreverent opinions *In Defense of Women*. He credits gold diggers’ intellectual contact with men as ameliorating their ability to transcend morally limiting categorizations and socioeconomic circumstances, and take on, if not “true” wifely characteristics, at least adequate social strategies to perform the role:

At once they come into contact, hitherto socially difficult and sometimes almost impossible, with men of higher classes, and begin to take on, with the curious facility of their sex, the refinements and tastes and points of view of those classes. The mistress thus gathers charm, and what has begun as a sordid sale of amiability not uncommonly ends with formal marriage. (188)



Lorelei, who was, according to the myth of the text's genesis, inspired by one of Mencken's female companions, takes this advice to heart: she always wants to "improve [her] mind and not waste any time" (Loos, *Blondes* 7).

Veblen's *Theory of the Leisure Class* emphasizes the function of a wealthy man's wife as a site of conspicuous consumption, a surface spectacle to reveal the depths of the man's finances. The figure of the gold digger is, in some ways, a Veblenian creature, nurtured and defined in a culture of conspicuous consumption. In Anita Loos's major opus, however, the gold digger/blonde is more than simply shorthand for prosperity. Although Lorelei is a caricature, she is not merely a symbol of personal wealth or societal extravagance. In fact, Lorelei Lee is deft at developing and using an economic language. Her play with the semiotics of capital is valuable for analysis as it demonstrates a position of mediation into the oppressive theory that modernism reduces woman to sign. Laws governing exchange of women are related to laws governing exchange of property and laws governing exchange of words (Brooke-Rose). The intervention of Lorelei into these laws is non-offensive because she is a naïf. Loos employs the convention of naïve hero to develop irony and sustain satirical comment on such targets as bourgeois marriage, hypocrisy of Americans' attitude to sex, the myth of the self-made man, and patriotic consumption. By developing the paradoxical creation of the naïve gold digger, Loos also levels a critique against the popular and reformist discourses that first purveyed the woman

adrift as a lost, needy orphan and then, as a potential greedy, dangerous sexual predator who manipulates men with her sexual magnetism. Lorelei is a direct comment on both these types. Loos parodies the sentimental novels that “presented a caricature of the orphaned and innocent woman adrift. The heroines, of course, were always good at heart and sexually pure. They were young, white, native born, and naïve. The stories exaggerated their childlike qualities. In fact, the authors often described them as prepubescent...” (Meyerowitz 58). Lorelei is sweet and gentle, and yet she is unquestionably a gold digger, and an unabashed one at that. How can these two supposed antagonistic qualities coexist in the same character? Hollywood movies and popular magazine and paperback fiction were enamored of using the formula of “the bad girl redeemed” (Meyerowitz 131) in order to capitalize on the titillating nightclub settings that a wild, sexually aggressive woman might frequent while endorsing a morality that rewarded women for fidelity and punished them for sex outside of marriage. Another strategy that films and popular texts used in order to legitimize their use of the modern glittering cityscape without compromising the narrative’s moral values was the twin or pair convention. Movies would be structured around a good twin/bad twin pairing or some variation, often played by the same actress, to visually allegorize the choices a woman had to make (Basinger 84). Jeanine Basinger suggests that these pairings afford the female viewer vicarious pleasure, usually through the bad twin’s glamorous attire, recklessness, and pursuit of

sexual satisfaction. They also reiterated the idea that decadent behavior was punished while goodness was always rewarded with true love. Such narratives, Basinger asserts, were exceedingly popular because they gave shape to the contradictions that women were feeling about their own life choices.

Loos's Lorelei, however, is the girl who has it all, who never has to make a choice, who indeed, refuses to make a choice. In the terms of this popular discourse, Lorelei is bad, but she acts like she's good, she even convinces people she's good, and she still gets to enjoy all the advantages of being bad. Lorelei follows in the tradition of Henry James's Daisy Miller, the girl who announces that she has "always had... a great deal of gentlemen's society" (James 57), the epitome of the "American Girl [who] is innocent by definition, mythically innocent; and ... her purity depends upon nothing she says or does..." (Fiedler, quoted by Moore 38).<sup>12</sup> According to Gaylyn Studlar, when in July 1925, *McCall's* asked the question, "Which do our American men really prefer—the bold, modern flapper or the demure girl of yesteryear?" (quoted in Studlar 278), the answer was both. Men wanted a companion/partner wife who catered to him and an honest, pure-hearted girl with all the trappings of modern flash and glamour. Men apparently wanted an old-fashioned, modern girl, perhaps not realizing that this combination could look like Lorelei.

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<sup>12</sup> Carrie also somewhat fits into this category in that she does not perceive herself as a mistress and continually expects marriage from both her suitors.

Lorelei, this paradoxical creation of bimbo and brain, naïf and sophisticate, exposes the ambivalence of Americans' views of female sexuality.

Loos's two novellas set up a dichotomous/pair relationship between the blonde and the brunette. In *A Woman's View: How Hollywood Spoke to Women, 1930–1960*, Jeanine Basinger elaborates a theory of how films used the technique of pairing women to simultaneously resonate with women's inner desires for freedom while promoting conformity as the strategy for happiness. This strategy also appears in popular literature of the period. In Loos's texts Dorothy is established as the wisecracking, cynical brunette, who, for all her worldly knowledge, makes financially disastrous choices. Lorelei is the too-naïve-to-be-credible blonde who actually possesses glamour, panache, and abundant economic savvy; the two girls do more than function as foils for each other. While Dorothy is the type of girl who wastes "quite a lot of time going out with [a dancer] who is out of a job" because "she is getting to really like somebody" (Loos, *Blondes* 42), and who "travelled all over Europe and all she came home with was a bangle" (Loos, *Blondes* 102), Lorelei comes back from her trip with a diamond tiara, some unset diamonds, and a rich potential husband. The female reader might admire Lorelei's nerve but empathize and relate to Dorothy and Dorothy's commentary on Lorelei. I would like to suggest that, through this pairing, *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* creates a position for a type of vicarious consumer not considered by Veblen in his theory of conspicuous

consumption: that of the female reader. The Lorelei-Dorothy pairing succeeds as a comic device because it enables the brilliant ditz to succeed while enabling ironic distance from the narrator, a distance that maintains in the reader a simultaneous identification and disavowal of Lorelei. Basinger notes that in comedies, “a woman can do terrible things to a man and get away with it” (105). Loos’s novel uses a similar structure. Lorelei does outrageous things that would horrify a society that takes its proscriptions on romance and sentimentality seriously but her actions are couched with humor. She ridicules men, marriage, and work but because these things are done in the context of comedy they are palatable. Comedy such as Loos’s enables subversive performances to be enacted and given expression while rendering them harmless, or at least apparently harmless.

Lorelei’s naivete also functions as a defense against the cynicism that would certainly pervade the book if it were seen through the perspective of someone like Dorothy. Lorelei’s attitude to and understanding of modern money exchange are frequently alarmingly perspicacious when considered issuing from anyone other than a fun-loving, jewelry-obsessed blonde. For instance, Lorelei’s capricious statement that “...the good thing about French gentlemen is that every time a French gentleman starts in to squeal, you can always stop him with five francs, no matter who he is” (Loos, *Blondes* 51) resonates quite provocatively with one of Simmel’s more disturbing observations:

The more money becomes the sole centre of interest, the more one discovers that honour and conviction, talent and virtue, beauty and salvation of the soul, are exchanged against money and so the more a mocking and frivolous attitude will develop in relation to these higher values that are for sale for the same kind of value as groceries, and that also command a 'market price.' (Simmel, *Money* 256)

Lorelei, coming from a middle class family in Arkansas that had modest aspirations for their daughter to be a stenographer, exploits the liberating effects of this pervasive commodification of life with the true panache of any businessman pursuing the American dream. Lorelei takes to heart, and perhaps also to a new level, Mr. Eisman's words of advice "to take advantage of everybody we meet as traveling is the highest form of education" (Loos, *Blondes* 32), and follows the advice even when not traveling.

Lorelei Lee's ability to communicate with the "signs" of money is at once playful and profound; like many satirical texts, *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* installs a figure of low origins into a place of privilege to illuminate hypocrisy or arbitrariness of a society. Lorelei is a figure of contradictions—she is innocent and artful, sophisticated and ingenuous. Anita Loos's satire is a critical site of the interplay between economics and relationships and what that interplay might mean for women in the early twentieth century. While Veblen's theory is, as Adam Gopnik suggests, insistent "on reducing aesthetics to economics" (179), Lorelei Lee reduces, or rather, reinvents economics as aesthetics. Lorelei demonstrates that aesthetics and economics

cannot help but bleed into one another in the modern money economy and she takes full advantage of this blurring of distinction. All the trouble Lorelei undertakes to acquire and hold onto the diamond tiara is justified by Veblen's theory that "[t]he superior gratification derived from the use and contemplation of costly and supposedly beautiful products is, commonly, in great measure, a gratification of our sense of costliness masquerading under the name of beauty" (Veblen 95).

In *The Philosophy of Money*, Simmel frequently appeals to the language of love in order to talk about money. Although at times, Simmel tries to contrast love, "the most refined and intimate relations" and money, a purely base form of exchange, his continual recourse to love analogies indicates the inter-embeddedness of these two forms of exchange:

In every love relationship, the one who is less involved has an advantage, because the other renounces from the beginning any exploitation of the relationship, is more ready to make sacrifices and offers a greater measure of devotion in exchange for the greater satisfaction he derives. Equity is thus established: since the degree of desire corresponds with the degree of enjoyment it is right that the relationship should provide the individual who is less involved with a special gain ... (Simmel 215)

Simmel's attempt to equate a romantic relationship with a financial trade is paralleled by Lorelei Lee's reflection on enjoyment at the expense of profit: "I mean I always seem to think that when a girl really enjoys being with a gentleman, it puts her to quite a disadvantage and no real good can come of it" (Loos, *Blondes* 42). Lorelei later nearly falls into this trap herself:

French gentlemen are really quite deceiving. I mean they take you to quite cute places and they make you feel quite good about yourself and you really seem to have a delightful time but when you get home and come to think it all over, all you have got is a fan that only cost 20 francs and a doll that they gave you away for nothing in a restaurant. I mean a girl has to look out in Paris, or she would have such a good time in Paris that she would not get anywheres. (Loos, *Blondes* 55)

Although Lorelei asserts that she has been deceived by Gallic charm, she is essentially declaring that her role is not one of enjoyment; the man is to have a greater “degree of enjoyment” and she is to reap “a special gain,” preferably in the form of precious stones.

While Simmel and Lorelei, the intellectual and the ditzzy blonde, seem to be positioned at opposite ends of the cultural field, they are, in fact, using different linguistic registers to talk about the same thing – money and its social use. Simmel, somewhat obscurely, relates the strength of physical love to the importance of money taking some sort of form:

...while the deepest and most sublime love may be that between two souls, which excludes all carnal desire, so long as such love is unattainable, the sentiment of love will develop most fully where a spiritual relation is complemented and mediated by a close sensual bond . . . Thus, although money with no intrinsic value would be the best means of exchange in an ideal social order, until that point is reached the most satisfactory form of money may be that which is bound to a material substance. (Simmel 191)

Simmel is suggesting that humans require representations not only to express their feelings but also in order to feel. Conceptualization of a feeling cannot be separated from the feeling itself. Physical equivalents for the feelings of love actually deepen



the love. By making the analogy between love and money, Simmel's attempted parallelism actually becomes a confounding of the categories. The romantic gift receives added value in this equation, is, in fact, a necessary corollary to feeling. Or, as Lorelei puts it, somewhat more succinctly than Simmel, "kissing your hand may make you feel very very good but a diamond and a safire bracelet lasts forever" (Loos, *Blondes* 55). Lorelei's statement cuts away the excess of Simmel's equation. It makes a leap in logic, true, but one that is implicit in Simmel's awkward and uneasy yoking of the terms sensuality, love, and materiality together – three terms that the gold digger unabashedly and unproblematically accepts as related. However, part of the gold digger's appeal is her continual play with what it means to accept romance and capitalism as inextricably intertwined.

The gold digger inhabits a liminal space wherein she is at once blunt about her motivation and mysterious in her practice. Part of her appeal is her curious contradiction of sexualized brashness and charm. One of the features key to maintaining this kind of perpetually shifting performance is the economy of the gift. The use of gifts to recompense a gold digger's time, charm, and services, enables the gold digger-sugar daddy relationship to remain within the bounds of legitimate courtship or social interaction. Using gifts enables a formality that can disguise or at least gloss over the commercialized nature of the relationship. It functions as object-based euphemism: "[g]ift exchange is one of the social games that cannot be played

unless the players refuse to acknowledge the objective truth of the game, the very truth that objective analysis brings to light, and unless they are predisposed to contribute, with their efforts, their marks of care and attention, and their time, to the production of collective misrecognition” (Bourdieu, *Logic* 105–06). The use of gift-giving masks the association of gold diggers to prostitutes. One of the taxi-dance hall patrons interviewed by Paul Cressey in his 1932 sociological study of Chicago dance halls makes this distinction between the gold-digging dancers and more professional women: “I’ve found that the main thing to remember in trying to interest these girls is that they are not hard-boiled prostitutes. They don’t want to make money that way. But they do like presents...” (Cressey 141).<sup>13</sup> The apparent purpose of the gift is to express admiration, affection, or ardor; this ostensible purpose, however, belies the potential of gift-giving to function as “a potent means of interpersonal influence....[which] allows individuals to insinuate certain symbolic properties into the lives of a gift recipient” (McCracken 84). The sugar daddy gives the gift in order to receive something in exchange. If the gold digger accepts the gift, she is obligated by the logic of gift exchange to provide a favor, a service, something in return. Theodore Dreiser’s gold digger Hortense Briggs, who reached the American reading public in *An American Tragedy* the same year as Lorelei, intuits this logic

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<sup>13</sup> Although Cressey’s study deals with taxi-dancers, there is great overlap between the taxi-dancer and the gold digger, as Cressey finds.

subconsciously. She likes the protagonist's "willingness to buy her any little thing in which she appeared interested—a bag, a scarf, a purse, a pair of gloves—anything that she could reasonably ask or take without obligating herself too much. And yet from the first, in her smart, tricky way, she realized that unless she could bring herself to yield to him—at some time or other offer him the definite reward which she knew he craved—she could not hold him indefinitely" (Dreiser, *Tragedy* 102). Gift-giving is also a way to exercise some level of control on identity. If the giver chooses the object, "the recipient of the gift is also the intended recipient of the symbolic properties that the gift contains" (McCracken 84). The act of giving a present is not simply representative of a relationship; it has efficacy to shape the relationship and the recipient. It does not only translate meaning into commodity terms, but creates and transfers meaning, and as such, is a part of the power-capital function.

Clothing is one of the gold digger's preferred "romantic gifts" to receive. It is also one of the most symbolic in the practice of gold digging because it represents brilliantly the dominant cultural relationship between public and private at a given point in time. On one hand, the gold digger uses her clothing as an actress does, as a costume. On the other hand, however, the gold digger has fully bought into advertising's notion that one can construct one's personality out of so many possessions, particularly one's clothes. As fashion was married to the automated practices of twentieth-century industrialism, it became a more complicated language and one that could not be extricated

from the discourse of consumerism. As well as possessing the potential to reproduce society's conventions, it became a system through which it was possible "to contest and challenge class and gender identities, as well as the relations of power and status that attend those identities" (Barnard 123).

In Dreiser's novel, Carrie's acceptance of clothing or money to purchase clothing from Drouet represents a transfer of power; by taking the clothing she acknowledges that she gives some power over herself to Drouet. However, the clothing also enables her access to power, albeit through a manipulation of female stereotyping. The issues of desire and guilt that characterize Carrie's relationship to luxurious clothes are alien to Lorelei, the quintessential gold digger who accepts gifts of clothing as her right. But clothing raises issues of power in Loos's texts, as well. Clearly, Gerry Lamson, Lorelei's literary gentleman friend, is an anomaly among sugar daddies. Lorelei puzzles over Gerry's directions to her to not dress up for their date: "So I really had to tell Gerry that if all the gentlemen were like he seems to be, Madame Frances' whole dress making establishment would have to go out of business. But Gerry does not like a girl to be nothing else but a doll, but he likes her to bring in her husband's slippers every evening and make him forget what he has gone through" (Loos, *Blondes* 10). This statement, which is recorded by Lorelei apparently devoid of any of her own opinion on the matter, actually provokes commentary on the changing nature of women's roles. The syntax of the remark "just a doll" suggests that Gerry might be promoting some

sort of feminist redress of women's treatment of objects but his preference turns out to be woman as a kind of fetching, soothing servant. Although no judgement is made, the implied question is which scenario is better? Are they different in any way? Although Lorelei seems quietaken with Gerry's ideas, her intellectual passion does not prevent her from being distracted in the same diary entry by thoughts of Mr. Georgopolis, who is a valuable acquaintance because of his preternatural willingness to go shopping—a rare specimen of male, indeed. All of Gerry's ideals are undercut by Lorelei's thoughts of shopping, suggesting that if the two modes of female behavior proffered are equal in their odious reduction of woman to object, at least one is more fun.

Loos provides historical background for Madame Frances and her business in *A Girl Like I*. This particular discussion in this autobiographical text also sets up Loos as a consumer of vicarious sartorial pleasures through her creation of Lorelei. Madame Frances seemed to be a kind of hub for gold diggers. She was not only the dressmaker from whom "the most prominent kept girls bought their clothes," which were "extremely feminine" using lavish amounts of lace and ribbons and pastel shades, but also

a sexy godmother for a number of Cinderellas. She could spot undiscovered talent as expertly as did Flo Ziegfeld, and when her antenna picked up a girl of humble circumstances who was worthy to wear her dresses, Madame Frances would stake the girl to them, send her out into the nightspots with an escort, and then present the accumulated bills to the first rich admirer the girl attracted. The system didn't seem the least bit gross; in those days money was undefiled by taxes and so alluring that it brought out feelings of romance in girls. (Loos, *Girl* 201–02)

Significantly, Loos laments that she herself was "barred from being a regular client"

despite the fact that she “admired Frances’s dresses and could well have afforded them.” Because her husband was slightly socialist, Loos “pretended to be above caring for fashion.... and didn’t even own that uniform for prosperous New York females, a mink coat, which,” she emphasizes, she “could have bought with a mere two weeks’ salary.” Although the overt subject here is her husband’s political beliefs, the subtext of the passage, and indeed, throughout much of the memoir, is conflict over money between men and women, husband and wife—who money rightly belongs to and the objects of its expenditure.

Would Anita Loos’s desire for a fur coat have been satisfied if she had become a gold digger? Although she writes the fur coat is the uniform of prosperous New York women, a category that could include women who are both kept and independent, in the early decades of the twentieth century, the item carries with it connotations of a luxury status which is most often purchased with voluptuousness. As a writer who was successful in marketing both her work and her image, Loos enjoyed a degree of financial success that was largely unattainable by most working—even professional—women. So why didn’t Loos buy herself a fur coat? The fur coat or wrap is perhaps the item of clothing that best represents the gold digger. It is clothing’s tendency to function as a register of difference that promotes a rich interpretation of the gold digger’s fur wrap. While the fur stole functions as one of the gold digger’s preferred and highly desired gifts, it also serves to brand her and label her visibly. The fur stole enables the gold digger to perform the role of the small, fluffy, helpless, mewling animal. According to Diane

Barthel, the fur coat is the ultimate symbol of

both the status of possession and the possession of status. In this dual process, women, as they don their minks, also assume the status of possession in both a sexual and financial sense . . . . By giving a fur to a woman, the man performs the ultimate cultural gesture, one with echoes of primitive exchange and protection . . . . When a young woman accepts a fur coat from an admirer, she signals her acceptance of dependent status. The possibility of her making a similarly expensive gift in return, given the disparity in income between the sexes is rare indeed. (Barthel 166–67)

The fur garment also places the gold digger's disregard for public and private into a visual economy. Clothing makes the self visible and, on some register, interpretable: "wearing clothes means obeying the imaginary laws of dress and making the body 'public': a sort of 'law of resemblance' that produces an image of clothing as a repository of otherness" (Barnard 59). The fur stole suggests the downy female genitalia. It exposes the gold digger as a *public* sexual object. Her sexuality *must* be publicized to be effective. Therefore, it is of little consequence whether or not the gold digger actually satisfies her benefactor sexually. She differs from the prostitute in this respect. She must furnish the idea of her desirability . . . . It is no mere coincidence that the emergence of the gold digger is contemporary with the shift of leisure and courtship activities to the public realm. At this period, in Western fashion, fur was coded almost exclusively as a female's garment; it reifies the notion, therefore of the gold digger's dependent status and conceals the reality of her savvy business acumen. Paradoxically, while the fur stole might signify that the wearer is a gold digger, it defuses the danger of what she represents by associating her with the

small animal and emphasizing her childish features. It shifts the context of the relationship to one of paternalistic affection and childlike reliance in order to present the woman as a naïve, dependent instead of a calculating, *interested*, twentieth-century capitalist. The gold digger herself is complicit in this representation. Publicity is often central to both the gold digger and the sugar daddy in their cultivation of social, cultural, and economic capital. The increasing importance of being seen in public in the early decades of the twentieth century contributed to the gold digger's flourishing in this period. As the practice of dating moved courtship practices into the public world, "relocating it from family parlors and community events to restaurants, theaters and dance halls" (Illouz 56), the visual economy became central to social relations. This movement meant that romance became "increasingly identified with participation in the cultural realms of entertainment and leisure" (Illouz 66) and also linked to competition in regards to status. While the movement of social interaction into the public sphere greatly expanded the number of potential suitors available to women, it also required greater attention to the new romantic requirements of conspicuous consumption, particularly in regard to clothing.

Jewelry also raises, for both Simmel and Lorelei, the question of how money relates to identity and personality or self. The traditional association of coins with jewelry suggests the desire to "have one's assets immediately by one's person and under control." One wonders whether Simmel himself could have been



seduced by Loreleian logic when he goes on to say that “Jewelry exists as an irradiation of the personality and it is therefore essential that it is something valuable when it radiates the personality” (Simmel, *Money* 329). Lorelei is horrified that someone might make her a present of imitation “paste” diamonds and that she might not know the difference. Upon seeing the paste diamonds, Lorelei acknowledges the power of the simulacrum—a power that she herself utilizes as a kind of performer—but displays revulsion at the idea of wearing imitation diamonds, although she develops a scheme to deceive Lady Beekman with them. Lorelei’s deep involvement with her jewelry, a structural motif of the novel, suggests that it does function as an extension of personality, or at least personality as constructed through commodities.

*Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* takes up the issue of the arbitrariness of value and the construction of value through advertising techniques while grappling with this question of how possessions metonymize the modern identity. Douglas and Isherwood, in *The World of Goods*, note that as the economy shifted in emphasis from production to consumption, so did the modes of self-definition and identity construction. Subjects would use consumption as a “ritual process whose primary function is to make sense of the inchoate flux of events” (Douglas and Isherwood 80). For instance, the gold digger’s collection of jewelry only has meaning in relation to the wife’s wedding ring. Her diamonds parody the wedding ring by inverting and

exposing the constructedness of the ring as signifier of marital affection and fidelity.

Lorelei exposes the sham of the meaning of the bourgeois wedding ring when she is

confronted with the wife of the admirer who purchased for Lorelei an exquisite

diamond tiara: "So it seems that she said that if I did not give her back the diamond

tiara right away, she would make quite a fuss and she would ruin my reputation.

Because she said that something really must be wrong about the whole thing.

Because it seems that Sir Francis Beekman and she have been married for 35 years

and the last present he gave to her was a wedding ring" (Loos, *Blondes* 57–58).

Lorelei's diary is structured through her choices as a consumer. She reads people through their expenditures and her shorthand style conveys immediate and comprehensible meaning. Her reflection on Lady Francis Beekman as "the kind of a wealthy lady that does not spend money on anything else but she will always spend money on a law suit" (Loos, *Blondes* 64) is linguistically efficient as well as witty. For Lorelei, at least part of "the value of goods lies in their uses by 'members' (of a society) to make their judgments on each visible to each other" (Munro 256). The phrasing here is revealing: it is not a unilateral construction of identity through consumption and use of goods; identity is constructed as much by being viewed by others, by being rendered visible by particular goods. One may choose one's clothing individually, but even if one chooses to disregard fashion, one's choices are read through the semiotics of the fashion system. One's identity or what is perceived as

self, therefore, in the modern consumer world, is not an individualist creation but always a function of processes of cultural-economic exchange. The gold digger recognizes that she is implicated by this system of exchanges as one more object to enhance value, construct meaning. The show girls Anita Loos met revealed that they were aware of their function in such exchanges between men: "Their biggest gripe was that their protectors regarded a mistress only as a means of calling attention to themselves. Bedding one of these beauties bolstered their status with their peers. It was, Anita, concluded, 'the ultimate form of male vanity'" (Carey 86). The gold digger can never stop performing her value, it is, by definition, performative.

There is no doubt that Lorelei Lee is an adept, even sublime performer. Paul Rudnick's recent "deconstruction" of the consummate blonde, Marilyn Monroe, in *Time's* 1999 issue devoted to twentieth-century notables, pivots on her role as Lorelei Lee in the 1953 film version of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*. Rudnick suggests that a blurring has occurred between Monroe's most identifiable role and her own persona. What Rudnick circles around but never states is the reason this particular role remains the quintessential Marilyn role; Marilyn was performing the role of an already great performer. When one considers Madonna's version of the part in her "Material Girl" video, one seems to be contemplating a true *mise en abîme* of performance. Certainly, in the novel, Lorelei is performing a type of femininity, which is, for her, a performance of identity. What is striking and intriguing about Anita Loos's satire is

how it questions whether there is anything but the performance of self. The reader is not interested in whether Lorelei is putting things down exactly as she sees them; Lorelei's diary is a kind of simulated artifact. For instance, Lorelei does not see any irony in her statement that "Piggie always says that I am the only one who admires him for what he really is" (Loos, *Blondes* 42). If Dorothy had said that, we would immediately understand it as sarcastic. Lorelei's delivery provides an initial laugh since we all know that Lorelei admires Piggie only for his money, but this line is particularly resonant in a society that is increasingly communicating all values, including personal ones, in monetary terms. In Simmel's terms: "one may characterize the effect of money as an atomization of the individual person" (342). Piggie is his money. It is the idea that this is precisely Lorelei's viewpoint that makes many of the observations so amusing in their naïve profundity. Loos's use of irony in this diary genre reinforces the performative quality of gold digging. Lorelei has internalized her performance to the extent that she has become it. She has become the image of herself in a visual economy where "images become more real than real" (Baudrillard, *Simulacra* 195).

While the gold digger epitomizes the modern preoccupation with enacting private, courtship rituals in the public sphere, she does not uphold the modern divide between work and leisure. This is one reason why she is perceived as a threat to American culture: she calls into question not only the nature of women's work but

also the nature of work, in general. Lorelei's work—that is, her literary opus, at once affirms and problematizes conceptions of women as artist-workers. Loos employs the simple but effective technique of having her naïf write a diary narrative. The diary is a classic outlet for women's literary expression, although *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* breaks the rules of the journal as sanctified feminist text by having a gentleman friend suggest the idea to Lorelei. This gentleman is essentially a patron: Lorelei asserts that “[i]t would be strange if I turned out to be an authoress” (Loos, *Blondes* 4) but it would be even less likely that she would turn out to be an authoress if she were still doing stenography or stranger yet if she were one of the mass of girls working in a garment factory. Although Lorelei is enabled time to write through a somewhat different mode than, for instance, the well-born Elinor Glyn, significantly she is afforded the privilege of leisure and funds to sustain her endeavors, conditions that were of concern to all writers, but particularly writers who were women. As commodification increased the demands on artists to be marketable, many artists in all fields found themselves in similar positions to gold diggers, a theme echoed in Dawn Powell's novels.

Anita Loos draws attention to the contradictory expectations placed on female writers. The presence of the gold digger is palpable throughout Loos's autobiography *A Girl Like I*, both as a literary construct in the figure of her deliciously infamous creation Lorelei and as a more ghostly, ambiguous emanation—the shadow side of

the writer—which seems to haunt Loos’s attempts to construct her own creative identity. The genesis of her writing career is linked, if indirectly, to the fact that she does not, for various reasons, “hook a millionaire.” For instance, her early desire to escape a mundane existence, a classic episode in any picaresque, is initially channeled into the goal of marriage as upward mobility:

From the moment I first began to dream about a more sophisticated life than the one we led in grimy downtown San Diego, I decided that the quickest way to attain it was through that standard trick which antedates Cinderella: marry a millionaire. And an exotic bungalow looking out on the Pacific from the sun-kissed shore of Southern California seemed an ideal base of operations. Its walls were the burnished gold of dried palm leaves, the furnishings were picturesquely nautical, the floor was carpeted with fragrant matting, and “rooms” were partitioned off by chintz curtains of jungle green....A girl who couldn’t hook a millionaire in such an environment would have to be a gargoyle. (Loos, *Girl 68*)

This passage, which forms the opening for Loos’s chapter detailing her early career successes, contains one enormous leap. The passage moves out of “grimy, downtown San Diego” to “an exotic bungalow looking out on the Pacific” in one sentence.

What Loos leaves out is the fact that her screenwriting and scenarios enabled her to establish herself in a Hollywood bungalow.

The detail of the passage itself is cinematic, emphasizing the coincidence of gold digging with a movie-style glamour. It also relies on a contradictory notion of gold digging as something that can be practiced, involving military-style tactics but also something that, at least in certain environs, is inevitable. Loos presents this

scenario partly to set up an ironic and playful comparison between herself and her most famous creation, Lorelei Lee. The tone throughout *A Girl Like I* recalls the precocity of Lorelei, with an injection of cynicism. At many times, *A Girl Like I* seems to read like a protracted defense by the author whose position in the cultural field demands that she partake in the gold digger's spirit of naughtiness while affirming her literary credibility. Loos suggests, half humorously, half seriously, that her mother's command to reject the gift of a red Stutz roadster from a suitor, prevented her from success in that sort of field: "I now feel that Mother was responsible for the loss of a reward that might have inspired me to be a gold-digger. But I never learned the technique, and when at long last truth dawned I gave in to being the model for the unrewarded brunette of my major opus: a girl who would give up a diamond for a laugh (Loos, *Girl* 68). Loos feels compelled to define herself as a gold digger *manqué*—someone who could have attracted the sugar daddies and who did eventually learn the "technique" (suggesting, in contrast to her earlier statement, that perhaps something more than an exotically decorated bungalow is required) but who renounced gold digging for something nobler, but equally middle class—writing humorous movie scenarios. There is continual shifting throughout the memoirs between Loos's presentation of herself as a professional writer and her presentation of herself as girl whose femininity was cursed by a talent for writing:

In my own case I had a special sex problem to solve, and it taught me very early to keep my mouth shut about my literary career. When I first mentioned it to a beau, he thought I was lying. It was only too easy to prove the truth by producing a few letters of acceptance. They caused an even more unfortunate reaction; my beau didn't *want* to believe I was an authoress; it turned me into some sort of monster; I no longer seemed to be a girl. So I decided my literary life belonged to a secret world where I could be alone with my plots and those exciting vouchers signed by the scrawl of an unknown man named Griffith. (Loos, *Girl* 70)

The themes of romance and career intertwine throughout the memoir. Although it seems to be a Helen Gurly Brown style pronouncement to call this dilemma a “sex problem,” there is the suggestion in the passage that writing screenplays *and* receiving payment for them are marked with illicit, sexually charged pleasure. Loos secures the connection between gold digging and writing by recording bourgeois perspectives that assert that writing was not an activity for reputable women, and secondly, it was work that had the appearance of not being work. Forty years after the publication of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, which established the archetypal gold digger, Loos circles around the implications of her position as vicarious gold digger through her writing of Lorelei:

During those years of girlish maladjustment I underwent criticism from a source other than a beau. My accuser was Grandma Loos, who had come to join us from Newcomerstown after death of Pop's father. She was a mean, suspicious old lady and she confided to one of our neighbors that I was 'a bad lot. ' 'The child keeps getting money from somewhere,' said Grandma Loos, 'but she never does any work.' For in Grandma's mind a typewriter was some sort of decadent toy. (Loos, *Girl* 71)



The implication is that writing, like gold digging, is eroticized work and therefore an inappropriate career for decent women. Loos sets up a literary construct in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* in which gold digging, in addition to being a practice of vicarious consumption on behalf of a man, becomes vicarious consumption with a different object. By turning gold digging into a cultural artifact to be consumed, Loos inverts the gold digger relationship. She vicariously consumes, as writer, Lorelei's sugar daddies and enables her readers to do the same. Loos explores the negotiations and transactions necessary for women and writers in a modern capitalist society and the specific factors that might influence a female writer's choices in this cultural field.

#### 4 A Finished Woman

##### Crime and the Gold Digger in Dashiell Hammett's *Red Harvest*

In April of 1927, a murder case was reported in the *New York Times* that captured the reading public's attention. It had all the elements of a compelling pulp novel—a marcelled blonde who drank and gambled, illicit sex, contrived murder of a husband, and, perhaps most enthralling, metonymic details of a consumer lifestyle practiced beyond monetary means. William Marling describes it as an affair “with bad dialogue, an excuse for not missing what the age offered, and an imitation of style....a pretense for consumption” (153). One detail that received publicity was that the adulterous couple's handbook happened to be Anita Loos's *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*.<sup>14</sup> The fact that Ruth Snyder and Judd Gray named this novel as their inspirational literature emphasized how crime and extravagant consumption became yoked together in salacious news stories and fictional movie and detective story plots. James M. Cain worked the trial of this couple into his novel of 1934, *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, but by the mid-1920s, the gold digger was already a familiar figure familiar in the crime narrative.

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<sup>14</sup> The reputation of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* did not suffer quite so much from this use by criminals as did Charles Manson's later blaming of the Beatles' “Helter Skelter” for instructing him to kill, but it did develop into a kind of cultural shorthand for glorification of consumer extravagance and, as is seen in the film of 1953, was stripped away of many of its penetrating satirical elements.

The gold digger and the gangster are obvious associates, both in pursuit of the same thing: easy money. Both inhabit a realm that is defined by style and display.

Texts and films that

used the underworld to understand middle-class Americans' new sexual behavior linked the revolution in manners and morals to the consumer values that had emerged at the same time. To many gangsters, women were exquisite possessions that marked one's taste and rise in the world....Women welcomed the criminal's attention because he offered entrance into a world of exotic furs, fine automobiles, exclusive nightclubs, and luxury apartments. "Come on," one Warner Brothers gangster successfully urges a pretty young woman, "let's go spending." Films regularly featured women who carefully appraise the gangster's possessions. (Ruth 105)

The gangster's highly visible lavish spending habits enticed the women who desired the romance of material pleasure. Many sought the adventure related to the gangster's lifestyle, as another commodity-related thrill. For the gangster, a kind of raw, amoral businessman not far removed from the American tradition of the ambitious, self-made man, the gold digger—who receives the special designation of moll when her sugar daddies are exclusively in the underworld—is an asset to his own "profession" and is often treated as such. The moll is sometimes exchanged in a deal, acts as a decoy, or is used as a spy to get information from the enemy by sleeping with him. These types of practices suggest the moll is the most objectified

and denigrated of gold diggers. Dashiell Hammett's creation of Dinah Brand in *Red Harvest* enacts many of these stereotypes of the gangster's moll.<sup>15</sup>

Dinah Brand, in many ways, illustrates the dark side of gold digging—the opposite of the delicious machinations and games that characterize Lorelei's misadventures and the glib professionalism of Dawn Powell's gold diggers. Dinah embodies several gold digger trademarks. Like Lorelei, she displays a canny understanding of playing market forces against each other. Her explanation of insider trading locates her as a child of the fervid stock buying and selling that characterized the late 1920s: “Suppose you knew far enough ahead that a company's employees were going to strike, and when, and then far enough ahead when they were going to call the strike off. Could you take that info and some capital to the stock market and

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<sup>15</sup> In *Red Harvest*, the Continental Op, based in San Francisco, is called out to Personville for an assignment. Before he can meet with Mr. Willsson, who is ostensibly to explain the job, Mr. Willsson is murdered. The Op quickly learns that Elihu, symbolic patriarch of the town and Willsson's father, controls all media and the main industry in Personville, a bad combination for the progress of organized labor. Dinah Brand figures as a clue in Willsson's murder; Willsson had given her a check for five thousand dollars that day. The Op visits Dinah, the town's infamous gold digger, and learns that Dinah is willing to provide information, for a price. As the murders continue and the Op discovers the depths of the town's corruption, he becomes more determined to root out the evil in Personville, despite the fact that Elihu has changed his mind, and wants to call the investigation off. The web of payoffs and bribes becomes ever more entangled; labor organizers are in on scams, liquor smugglers are controlling town politics, boxing matches are fixed both ways, and police officers are involved in protecting the guilty, so long as they're friends and the benefits are clear. Deals are constantly being made, broken, and repaired but not before several more murders are committed as revenge on the double-crossers. The Op becomes poisoned by the town's toxic version of camaraderie and develops an intimate relationship with Dinah Brand. One morning, the Op wakes to find his hand on an ice pick that has pierced her chest. The Op, having been under the influence of gin and laudanum, is not sure that he has not killed Dinah, although he suspects and hopes he has not. After Reno confesses to the killing, the Op is able to return to San Francisco with his own moral code intact and Personville cleansed of its corruption, at least temporarily.

do yourself some good playing with the company's stock? You bet you could!"

(Hammett 35). Dinah eclipses even Lorelei in seeing the world as rife with opportunities for material rewards. Just as there is a kind of artistry to Lorelei's gold digging techniques of shameless compliments, Dinah's style of gold digging is not lacking a philosophy. She sums it up by telling the Continental Op: "It's not so much the money. It's the principle of the thing. If a girl's got something that's worth something to somebody, she's a boob if she doesn't collect" (Hammett 35). While Dinah is not a cliché gold digger, her attitude toward her practices has, like that of Lorelei, connotations of professionalism and a work ethic. Dinah's statement is both poignant and amusing. The fact that a girl is stupid if she does not trade on what she can indicates that, in the end, it is about the money, as much as it is glossed. As a gold digger who plies her trade in the underworld, Dinah offers to the gold digging tradition a site to examine the misogyny that is displaced onto ambitious women and the gritty desperation that can be a peril of cashing in on their appeal.

According to William Marling, Dashiell Hammett's original intention for Dinah Brand was for her to resemble "one of those vacuous flappers from Anita Loos's *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*" (118). Although this comment suggests a superficial reading of Loos's satire, Marling is correct to note the dramatic differences in the treatment of the gold digger figures in these two texts. Lorelei, despite her protestations to Mrs. Spoffard to the contrary, epitomizes the flapper's

style—emphasized by Ralph Barton’s illustrations of Lorelei as skinny and angular—and her public persona. In contrast, Dinah is a voluptuous woman, unsuited to the sheathed aesthetic of the period. Marling’s statement emphasizes that Hammett shapes Dinah in relation to a gold digger tradition and that he is consciously intervening in this tradition by choosing to represent Dinah as an atypical gold digger. Readers of this genre of fiction would have been familiar with the gold digger as a sleek, glamorous playmate of the gangster; a reading of Dinah against this figure is suggestive of the context readers of the period would bring to the text.

Dinah is a rather diversified gold digger, a trait that she shares with Carrie. Both women possess a nervy, gritty determination, an opportunism that extends beyond the quest for a rich admirer. Dinah is a true speculator in all senses of the term; she studies “financial service bulletins, stock and bond market forecasts....a racing chart” (Hammett 31). She looks for tips or fixes on the boxing match and puts a price on anything to which anyone might attach value. The plight of Dinah has the same Naturalist theme that Dreiser uses as a background for the story of Carrie. According to one critic, Hammett was a conscious student of the Naturalist school but “[w]here the earlier writers [of Naturalism] had somehow failed to get mass appeal, Hammett...and the Noir movement succeeded” (Pettengell 54). Dinah is sensitive to the economic tides and fluctuations of Personville, over which she has little control. She must remain an outsider to the coterie of male gangsters simply by virtue of her

gender. Although she is not given any ethnic background, she does not resemble the “blonde actresses [who were frequently used] to portray gangsters’ molls—Joan Blondell and Jean Harlow were regulars—[and who] confirmed that ‘non-ethnic’ women were in the vanguard of the new sexuality” (Ruth 104). That Dinah’s hair is dark and coarse suggests she is not the American ideal. Any access that she has to this inner circle is by virtue of her outsider status as a woman, and through monetary transactions:

[t]he role that the stranger plays within a social group directs him, from the outset, towards relations with the group that are mediated by money, above all because of the transportability and the extensive usefulness of money outside the boundaries of the group....The stranger as a person is predominantly interested in money for the same reason that makes money so valuable to the socially deprived: namely because it provides chances for him that are open to fully entitled persons or to the indigenous people by specific concrete channels and by personal relationships....[Strangers] are therefore dependent on intermediate trade which is much more elastic than primary production, since the sphere of trade can be expanded almost limitlessly by merely formal combinations and can absorb people from the outside whose roots do not lie in the group. (Simmel, *Money* 225)

Dinah establishes contacts with the wealthiest and most influential men in Personville, including “old Elihu Willsson....[who] was president and majority stockholder of the Personville Mining Corporation, ditto of the First National Bank, owner of the *Morning Herald*, and *Evening Herald*, the city’s only newspapers, and at least part owner of nearly every other enterprise of any importance” (Hammett 8). Dinah’s extensive network combined with her savvy in manifold areas of finance also

establish her as a prototype of the hard-boiled career woman that would soon become a staple figure of popular fiction and movies. While Dinah's appeal for Mr. Willsson is clearly her sexual charms, her seduction of the Continental Op occurs through her offer and his purchase of pieces of information and misinformation. This can be seen as a type of "intermediate trade," upon which Dinah builds a source of income.

Of all the gold diggers in this study, Dinah Brand is perhaps the one who is most physically evoked by her text. With the benefit of Ralph Barton's drawings for the 1925 publication of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, we assume that Lorelei has a girlish figure, that she is, and wears, "a mere slip of a thing." Lorelei's first literary appearance, after all, was in the fashion magazine *Harper's Bazaar*, alongside fashion illustrations promoting the smooth, slender and youthful look. Lorelei was a literary reification of a fashion ideal. *Red Harvest*, Hammett's first novel, was also first published serially in a magazine. It appeared in four segments between November 1927 and February 1928 in the pulp magazine *Black Mask*, which had been co-founded by H.L. Mencken as a source of funds for the more literary endeavor *Smart Set* (Marling 95). Readers of *Black Mask* would have been expecting a corruptly sophisticated moll from the very first description of Dinah as a "'soiled dove...a deluxe hustler, a big-league gold-digger'" (Hammett 22). Five pages later, Hammett continues to build mystery around Dinah but he destabilizes the reader's confidence in this woman as a familiar type by providing the reader with another character's



opinion of Dinah, this time that of one of her lovers, the bank teller, Robert Albury: “She’s money-mad, all right, but somehow you don’t mind it. She’s so thoroughly mercenary, so frankly greedy, that there’s nothing disagreeable about it. You’ll understand what I mean when you know her” (Hammett 27). Although the gold digger is frequently caricatured as grasping and calculating, she is usually successful in duping her sugar daddies with her performance of sophistication, or at least, entertaining them so wickedly that they enjoy, and therefore invest in, the charade. When Dinah is finally introduced first-hand to the reader, the Continental Op relates her presence as distinctly and overwhelmingly physical:

The young woman got up, kicked a couple of newspapers out of her way, and came to me with one hand out.

She was an inch or two taller than I, which made her about five feet eight. She had a broad-shouldered, full-breasted, round-hipped body and big muscular legs. The hand she gave me was soft, warm, strong. Her face was the face of a girl of twenty-five already showing signs of wear. Little lines crossed the corners of her big ripe mouth. Fainter lines were beginning to make nets around her thick-lashed eyes. They were large eyes, blue and a bit blood-shot.

Her coarse hair—brown—needed trimming and was parted crookedly. One side of her upper lip had been rouged higher than the other. Her dress was of a particularly unbecoming wine color, and it gaped here and there down one side, where she had neglected to snap the fasteners or they had popped open. There was a run down the front of her left stocking.

This was the Dinah Brand who took her pick of Poisonville’s men, according to what I had been told. (Hammett 32)

Dashiell Hammett, who wrote ad copy for Samuels Jewelry that had prospective fiancées hungering for the happiness that only exquisite, quality diamonds could

bring (Marling 94), frequently used a metonymic style in his novels, evoking character and developing intrigue through a choice between a bottle of Dewar and a bottle of King George. Dinah's run in her left stocking is such a use of metonymy, which establishes Dinah's relationship to consumer commodities and to herself as visible commodity. But while the run in Dinah's stocking figures forth her person, Hammett does not rely on one detail with Dinah. He embodies Dinah fully, as a conglomerate of curvaceous body parts. This has the effect of distancing Dinah even farther from the fashionable flapper of advertising discourse, whose charm stems from the fact that she is a sketch, a set of lines suggesting motion and change.

Accompanying this voluptuously disordered embodiment is a sexualization of Dinah that is both more frank and smoldering than that of any of the other gold diggers in this study. Dinah's body is present in a text as a sexual entity despite her sloppy grooming or, perhaps, because of it. More often than not, Dinah's dress and stockings are gaping or torn, suggesting that they cannot contain her voluminous figure or her profuse sexual magnetism. Dinah is a vamp-style gold digger, having more in common with the old model sex symbol Theda Bara than Clara Bow and the succession of lithe "It girls." The Continental Op notes, after being shook by Dinah, that she resembles one of the "young women who look like something out of mythology when they're steamed up" (Hammett 132), a depiction that suggests an unworldly, vampiric sexuality. Significantly, only Carrie is given comparably

significant physical descriptions—the other gold digger created by a male writer. While Dawn Powell's various gold diggers and even Lorelei can distract a reader with their well-cut clothes, witty chatter, and lively flirtation from remembering that sex remains at the basis of the gold digger's set of exchange values, both Carrie and Dinah cannot ignore this fact. While the other gold diggers capitalize primarily on their performance values and nightclub allure, Dinah conducts most of her gold digging in private spaces—her house, her little blue Marmon automobile, hotel rooms, and others' houses. Although Personville is called a city, the narrative presents it as a close space, tight and smothering in its lack of discretion; even when business is done behind closed doors, the power elite of the town seems to know the details instantaneously. The gold digger has a somewhat different role in such a setting than in a metropolis, her services are less performance-based and more sexually based.

Associated with the fact that Dinah is constantly being defined sexually, is the frequent objectification of her character. Hammett uses his metonymic style to conjure Dinah by simply mentioning “[h]er big ripe mouth” (Hammett 67), or that her “[s]tocking seams made s's up the ample backs of her legs” (Hammett 104).

Although Marling sees Dinah as articulating “the frustration of women who could not imitate the lacquered look of the 1920s flapper” (Marling 119), her objectification by the text is even more insidious. The suggestion is that it does not matter whether or

not a woman achieves the fashion ideal with consumer goods—either way, she cannot escape her status as object. That Dinah is described as having “a face hard as a silver dollar” (Hammett 105) and looking “like a lot of money in a big gray fur coat” (Hammett 75) indicates that not only has she internalized her profession but she is seen by the men who interact with her as a personification of money. She is, like money, form to be filled with their projections of value and desire:

Money has the very positive quality that is designated by the negative lack of character. The individual whom we regard as a weak character is not directed by the inner worth of persons, things, or thoughts, but by the external pressure that is brought to bear on him. The fact that money is detached from all specific contents and exists only as a quantity earns for money and for those people who are only interested in money the quality of characterlessness. (Simmel, *Money* 216)

Although this lack of character makes money an efficient mode of measuring and exchanging values, Dinah’s presence as an object-value in the text renders any agency she possesses as futile. Dinah professes that money is her language, and that quantity aids understanding (Hammett 33). Although Dinah may be well versed in this language and speak it like a native, she cannot fully control the discourse. The discourse of money ends up speaking through her and, in the process, defining her in its terms. Dinah’s murder by ice pick, as well as being rife with phallic implications, is symbolic for a woman who dared to match men in her drinking habits, and who used her sex appeal as an asset in business deals. Dinah’s death is the ultimate act of

expenditure by the several men complicit in the murder. Her death makes her fully into an object—a token of money.

The transformation of Dinah from gold-digging woman to Dinah as silent, motionless object enables the mystery of Personville to be unraveled. Dinah is exchanged for peace and stability in the city; her death brings the various male parties involved into a more intimate, direct form of exchange with each other. The economy of *Red Harvest* suggests that the mediation of a gold digger, or of any woman, into the masculine realm contributes to economic and social disorder. Her death is the novel's turning point, after which, the Continental Op—the other stranger in the text—is able to participate, if only perfunctorily, in Personville's homosocial exchange community. "Personville" is not only an ironic misnomer for the corrupt town because the place dehumanizes anyone who stays longer than a day but also because it contains a gender neutral term that evokes women's struggle for political equality with men and the suffrage movement. Personville, nicknamed Poisonville, could be called "Patriarchville"; while the law of its father Elihu Willsson is exposed as putrescent by the Continental Op, the town, by the text's conclusion is in an improved condition but has not undergone any significant re-ordering. It is, in fact, "under martial law" (Hammett 216). The narrative structure exemplifies the idea that "the power relationships between men and women appear to be dependent on the power relationships between men and men" (Sedgwick 25). Personville as a

microcosm of American culture is a damning critique. The negotiations for empowerment within such a society, to use the terms in Sedgwick's argument, are equivalent to backroom dealing, bribes, swindles, and scams. Although Dinah has honed her talent for such transactions, her success is necessarily limited, as it always is for an outsider playing in a fixed game.

Any freedom the gold digger possesses is restricted by strategies of power maintenance enacted by the status quo. By creating a new position in the seduction economy, the gold digger effects a shift in the dynamics of the structure. The gold digger functions in this structure as a female seducer. I am suggesting that the female seducer is distinct from the seductress in the mode of her seduction, though possibly not in her motivation. The seductress entices from a supine, passive stance. She is invested with a mysterious power that lures men. The female seducer, on the other hand, actively seeks and pursues her goal. Ironically, while this space appears to afford agency, any real power is circumscribed. The ordering of desire is always intertwined with capital, and therefore with power (Baudrillard, *Seduction*), and power, especially when related to production (of goods, discourses) tends always to reproduce itself:

The pre-emptive rights on the future that are defined by law and by the monopolistic right to certain possibles...are merely the explicitly guaranteed form of the whole set of appropriated chances through which the power relations of the present project themselves into the future, from where they

govern present dispositions, especially those towards the future. (Bourdieu, *Logic 64*)

Systems have a mechanism built into them to safeguard and maintain the current distribution of power. While Personville may be cleansed, the text is bleak on whether women and organized labor, two segments of the American population desiring renegotiations in regard to their status, have any opportunity for meaningful change.

## 5 Portrait of the Artist as a Gold Digger Polymorphic Gold Digging in Dawn Powell's New York Novels

"In the city the elements themselves were money: air was money, fire was money, water was money, the need of, the quest for, the greed for. Love was money. There was money or death"(Powell, *Wicked* 5). Dawn Powell's New York novels chronicle and lampoon the role of money in the intersecting spheres of business, Bohemia, art, and society through the 1930s to the early 1950s. Money *does* talk in these novels; money is talking through the characters, the settings, personal possessions, and the silences. It is both the mode of communication among these supposedly disparate circles and the reason for communication among them. It is also a language that has developed new terms and new meanings for old terms. Whether or not a corporate gold digger like Dinah Brand could survive the economic culture of the United States in 1929, the year marked a shift in the nation's financial self-consciousness. The stock market crash was the inevitable trough of a cycle that had buoyed thousands of middle-class Americans into consumerist actualization. It necessitated a re-evaluation of lifestyle norms with which Americans had just become comfortable over the decade. Although statisticians insist that the average household wherein the principal earner remained employed actually had a higher standard of



living and were able to save more money on essentials like food, the Depression and its more tumultuous factors were reminders that money could not always easily be made.

Societies that are most likely to breed gold diggers are those in which there exists a remarkable discrepancy between real economic conditions (including distribution of wealth and availability of opportunities to various socioeconomic strata) and the portrayal of such categories in economic propaganda (including advertising, film, and media constructions). The proliferation of media forms in the 1910s and 1920s meant an insistent flaunting of symbols of women's economic independence; American women felt, for the most part, that their opportunities were increasing. The actual figures suggest that American women's involvement in work was somewhat more complicated:

The rate of increase in the percentage of women in paid employment dropped sharply after 1910, and the 1920s saw a tightening of opportunities for women in many high-status professions. Nevertheless, working women in the 1920s attained a new visibility and the public scrutiny that accompanied it. Much of this cultural prominence resulted from shifts in the types of women who worked and in the kinds of work they did. The proportion of employed women in clerical, managerial, sales, or professional jobs jumped from 18 percent in 1900 to 44 percent in 1930. Many of these highly visible jobs were filled by middle-class and married women whose predecessors a generation earlier had been much less likely to work outside the household. Female professionals, especially the few in predominantly male fields like law and medicine, became powerful symbols of women's new roles even as their own career prospects dimmed. (Ruth 98)

The Depression made concrete the risks involved in speculation and convinced many that the concept of easy money was flawed and fallacious. She is an admission of society's failure to provide egalitarian economic opportunity without fully letting the dream die. The gold digger, who embodies the tension between financial dependence and independence, is an adaptation for this type of society.

Dawn Powell's New York texts demonstrate the adaptations and transformations of gold diggers necessitated by American culture. In these novels, gold digging is practiced by virtually anyone and everyone. Gold digging is no longer simply the modus operandi for women adrift like Carrie to survive or the pastime of choice for opportunistic party girls like Lorelei; Powell's novels demonstrate that it is embedded in every transaction in American culture. With Powell's dizzying array of characters and motives, one can read the novels as a game: spot the gold diggers. Her gentle satire unmasks a lot of activity that is frequently represented otherwise, as gold digging. By the 1940s, this proliferation of money-mad transactions in all segments of the population combined with the increasing opportunities for women in diverse career paths had made the label "gold digger" inadequate. Powell's novels use the word gold digger and contain many characters that are gold diggers proper. These women are employed to accent the money-lust of the other characters. These gold diggers are in place to emphasize the contradictions within American culture which affect women's work conditions. At a rhetorical

level, the gold diggers are etymological and cultural remnants that remain in the cultural consciousness to haunt the progress of modern career women. The novels portray a range of economic roles and positions for women from the well-married to the commercial artist to the businesswoman to the magazine editor. All of these women must contend with the specter of the gold digger as they adapt and innovate new strategies for financial success. While the texts expand gold digging beyond its previously defined sphere so that this label no longer works, they also demonstrate that the tensions between sex and money that inform the practice of gold digging continue to circulate in economic relations, albeit in shifting forms.

The pattern of homosocial exchange which precipitates Dinah's death in *Red Harvest* remains central to the communities that sustain and encourage gold digging in New York in the 1930s and 1940s. Powell consistently has pairs of men entertaining and being entertained by the gold-digger figures. Although the girl is always supported as a companion by one of the men, her position is reinforced by the presence of that man's business partner or buddy. The first scene in *Angels on Toast* demonstrates the bond that exists between Lou Donovan and Jay Oliver through their easy and comfortable banter.<sup>16</sup> Ebie Vane, whose status as a gold digger is constantly

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<sup>16</sup> In *Angels on Toast*, Lou Donovan and Jay Oliver are about to make a really big business deal. The two management level men are in on the investments for a brand new luxury resort that they hope will make them rich. In the meantime, Jay spends his free time in bars with his mistress/girlfriend Ebie Vane, a commercial artist who is torn between independence and wanting to be married. Truesdale, the

shifting and ambiguous, is Jay Oliver's girlfriend but her "dates" with Jay are frequently attended by Lou. When Jay's wife makes a sudden appearance, Lou takes responsibility for Ebie. But Lou does not simply cover for his best friend; he ends up in bed with Ebie, literally sharing her with him. The triangulated relationship establishes both sexual competition and attraction between the two men. Ebie is, in some sense, a cover for Lou and Jay: the two men cannot be constantly together without the presence of a woman without sparking rumors of homosexuality. The presence of Ebie allows them to be together while avoiding the trouble and inconvenience of wives. After all, men understood the code of companions and knew that "a wife on a business trip, for instance, was just a wife, a poor piece of business, a dangerous exhibition of fatuity, very different indeed from the favorable impression of being independent"(Powell, *Angels* 194). Lou's ex-wife Francie draws attention to the nature of the routines that men cultivate when conducting business and the importance of pleasure to the completion of deals: "I should think those convention boys would go someplace where they could get girls instead of just drinking here with

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ubiquitous swindler with a different proposition for everyone he meets, ingratiates himself with Ebie's mother. Lou seeks relief from strained relations with his well-bred, society wife, Mary, by taking up with Trina Kameray, who shows up from out of nowhere with a phony accent and just enough sex appeal. Mary wants to seek revenge on her husband by undertaking her own illicit affair but is unable to go through with it and becomes neurotic as a result. Lou must also contend with his past wife, a floozy named Francie, reappearing and looking for a share of Lou's money to support her new man, a chronic gambler. In the end, Truesdale and Mrs. Vane make some successful investments together, Jay proposes to Ebie, who accepts that Jay will be alimony-poor, and Lou prepares to reinvent himself and seek a fortune with the name Cassidy.

no fun.” Lou’s reply is both anxious and defensive. He is at once protecting the privacy of the boys’ club while normalizing it in terms of heterosexual desire:

‘I get girls for them all right, never mind about that,’ said Lou shortly. ‘Never let it be said! I ate up a half dozen live numbers from the Spinning Top down the street or a couple of dancers from Giulio’s Grotto. They drop in between floor shows over there and keep things moving. Most of them leave with a hundred-dollar bill stuck in their pocket. These guys are the real thing, you know, and do the babes know it!’ (Powell, *Angels* 111)

The implication is that masculinity is a function of monetary worth. But the deeper suggestion behind Lou’s statement is that the men are not only spending money to impress “the babes” but to impress each other. The dancer-gold diggers become part of the men’s bluff or braggadocio in their deal making with each other.

In *The Locusts Have No King* (1948), Frederick Olliver and Murray Cahill, as roommates, protect each other from threat of women’s penetration into their manly domestic environment: “[w]omen were always infuriated at the Murray-Frederick establishment for it hinted of a permanent stronghold against marriage.<sup>17</sup> ‘You lucky

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<sup>17</sup> *The Locusts Have No King* focuses on Frederick Olliver, the impoverished, unrecognized historian who is in love with playwright Lyle Gaynor, who is not only married but socially out of his league. To prove his love for her, Frederick attends all the elite parties and dinners with her and her invalid husband. Frederick’s frustration with this situation leads him to imitate the lifestyle of his roommate, Murray, who is widely reputed to be a womanizer. Frederick decides to have some “light” romantic adventures with the childish gold digger Dodo Brennan to counteract the effects of his burdensome passion for Lyle. As Frederick also develops a closer friendship with Murray, he becomes acquainted with the modern, career women, Lorna Leahy and Caroline Drake, who are always looking for an extra man for their parties or nights on the town. The women bond over their broken marriages (the result of the superiority of their financial success to that of their husbands) and the fact that they can afford everything they want, which deprives them of the “female joy of window shopping” and longing for something unattainable. Frederick darts between Dodo, who offers him sensual pleasure and Lyle,

bastards!' married men friends always cried enviously. 'What a hideout!'" (Powell, *Locusts* 64). Although the two men begin as roommates, respecting each other's privacy and going for days without seeing each other, they eventually come to function as a partnership. Their domestic arrangement is compared to a marriage:

After living together for seven years and keeping a gentlemanly distance, Murray Cahill and Frederick Olliver were suddenly intimate friends. The reason for the new relationship was as justifiable as that for some marriages between antipodal personalities—that is, those involved had one major experience together: they were in the same hurricane, the same war, or the same spotlight at the same time. Murray was in a jam with women and conscience; so was Frederick. (Powell, *Locusts* 109)

The fact that Frederick and Murray can establish themselves as a kind of domestic unit suggests that the women in their lives have a different function and value than that of maintaining the home and its comforts. Murray is described as possessing an irresistible appeal for women, most likely due to "his passion for bars, poker, and a womanless world"(Powell, *Locusts* 11). While Frederick is jealous of having to share Lyle Gaynor with her invalid playwright husband Allan, his desire for Dodo, the young gold digger in training, is frequently conceptualized in relation to other men's

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who offers him intellectual stimulation, and worries about what one thinks about the other, all the while enjoying his anxiety. He also becomes the favorite, deserving writer and cause of Tyson Bricker, literary figure of some esteem who has built his reputation without ever producing his infamous work of criticism. Bricker is a sexual predator and a professional parasite, but he does help Frederick get published. After Dodo is deceived by millionaire Uncle Beckley, she decides, much to Frederick's relief, that Larry is a better "fish" than Frederick is. Frederick reunites with Lyle, whose decaying marriage has finally crumbled, but their embrace and confessions are marred by the noise of atom bomb testing.

desire for her. Dodo's ranking, as it were, of Frederick's body locates him in a community of men: "[t]he implication that Dodo was familiar with many other male bodies, far from disturbing him, made him feel safe and even flattered, for it showed he was not unique in surrendering to this particular temptation" (Powell, *Locusts* 95). Frederick, a loner by profession, uses Dodo to gain access to a new world of male camaraderie, even if this world is more idealized than actual: "It was as if he had suddenly been admitted to The Club, and was from now on privy to secrets of which he had never even dreamed, secrets that all other men had always known. The first time Dodo had spent the night with him had revealed a new world and a new self and had shocked him with the awful thought that he might so easily have gone on forever without this simple knowledge" (Powell, *Locusts* 97). It is intercourse with Dodo, who is perceived as a type of shared sexual property, that forms Frederick's passage of initiation into this world of men. Frederick becomes a man when he can enjoy sexual intercourse with this woman whom he does not love, when he develops the schemes and tricks that allow him to associate himself with "other blades" (Powell, *Locusts* 99) or rogues.

Dodo, in turn, uses her "dates" with various men to establish herself as a desirable commodity in the eyes of other men. She is constantly inviting men over to their table and pressuring her companions to introduce her to men who have more

wealth or fame. Dodo approximates a type noted by Paul Cressey in his 1932 investigation of gold-digging taxi-dancers: that of the “never-miss girl”:

She is the type known to the more initiated patrons [of the taxi-dance hall] to be quite affectionate. Sometimes to other taxi-dancers she may represent herself as successfully ‘fishing’ her men friends. But to her masculine acquaintances she presents an entirely different picture. The girl of this type may occasionally have a little retinue of men who have special “rôles” or functions in her life. Toward each she has a certain romantic interest, though even with her it is sometimes coupled with a unique sense of objectivity and detachment....the taxi-dancer of this type is torn between the double dilemma of respectability with decreasing income and the greater hazard of becoming notorious... (Cressey 102–03)

Although the gold digger, as paid escort, is in some ways comparable to a sex-worker, she does not avoid the double standard that is applied to women’s reputations. Dodo and other gold diggers must constantly balance their popularity/respectability with caution so that they do not suffer from overexposure and become an all too common commodity. Dodo is clearly trying to imitate a glamorized image of the gold digger. Her model is someone like Lorelei who is never seen using anything but her charm and perhaps a little scheming to get the presents she sees as her inalienable right. Dodo is perhaps closer to “real” gold diggers, such as the ones in Cressey’s study:

The talk of the girls...[is] always the same. About the cabaret parties they’ve been to, and how much they drank, and how much the men spent on them. If it isn’t that it’s about how they “fished” a man for a ring with a big “rock” in it, or how they worked another for a watch. And so on. All the time they’re talking as though they got these things just because the guys were “fish.” We sit around and act like what we thought the girls were saying was the truth



when we know all the time that they had to do a lot of hustling to get the “rocks.” (Cressey 250)

Dodo and other gold diggers in Powell’s novels hustle. Their desperation occasionally shows through their mink stoles. Powell’s novels undercut the glamorized image of the gold digger with the image of Dodo mispricing her sexuality. After intercourse with Frederick, she suspects “that she had given away something worth more than she realized” (Powell, *Locusts* 100). Gold diggers are subject to the same economic laws that constitute value of any object in a capitalist society. Like any other seller, they have to follow market trends.

The illusory society of rogues is not the only community to which men can gain access through sexual relations or with a woman. In Dawn Powell’s *Turn, Magic Wheel*, Dennis Orphen, the first-time novelist who is seen around town escorting the ex-wife of a famous writer and is mistaken for her lover, denies that his interest in her is related to his aspirations, is, indeed, anything other than friendship.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> In *Turn, Magic Wheel*, Dennis Orphen’s novel *The Hunter’s Wife* elicits rave reviews and much attention from the literary in-crowd. Dennis is launched on a course of parties to promote his book and comes to understand the fickle buzz of fame and its influence on the politics of publishing. The novel also elicits painful memories within his best friend, Effie Callingham, ex-wife of important, ruggedly virile author Andy Callingham, as it is based on her life with the Hemingwayesque writer. Everyone assumes that Dennis and Effie are lovers, which is not true but does not complicate Dennis’s affair with Corinne, who is married. Not only does Effie have to deal with having her painful past exposed by her friend for the world to read about but she must also contend with the appearance of the desperately ill Marian, the woman for whom Andy left Effie, and who has now, in turn, been left. Effie is the only one who visits Marian in the hospital; she befriends her former rival and soothes her by telling her that Andy will come to see her, and even helps her to look her best for the day. Gossip columns place Andy with a new woman and when the great writer finally arrives in New York, Effie pleads with him to visit the dying Marian, all the while realizing that Andy is too childish to face the pain he has

He concedes, however, that such motivations are commonplace in many liaisons. He could easily be perceived as “just another of those ambitious young men who snatched up ex-wives and ex-mistresses of the elect, saw in this dim contact a personal promotion in line with their ambition, even whipped up love, even though the romance was not with the woman but with the success she had once lived with” (Powell, *Magic* 18). Powell’s novels suggest that women, whether gold diggers or not, get used as a form of cultural currency. Even the fabulously wealthy Cynthia Earle who collects artists as sexual partners as well as their paintings is subject to this kind of treatment.<sup>19</sup> The fact that Cynthia acts as the artists’ patron as well as their lover, while attaining her own funds from her marriages to bankers and lords,

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wrought. The novel ends with Dennis considering the unique bond between him and Effie, but elated to see Corinne, whom he knows will never leave her husband.

<sup>19</sup> *The Wicked Pavilion* centers around the lives of the patrons of the Café Julien, regulars and tourists, lovers, artists, society scions, and deal makers. The café, which represents a decaying order, retains its unimproved environment and its pretentious philosophy of service. It is a site of reunions—real and anticipated—and remembrances—cherished and relived. Rick waits, hoping to see his lost love Ellenora again, while artists Dalzell Sloane and Marius contemplate how the works of their artist friend of years ago, Ben, have become hot commodities since his death. The two artists are re-united with their former patroness and lover, the wealthy Cynthia Earle. In this satire of bohemians and society types, everything and everyone is being marketed with an angle. Dalzell and Marius try to pass off their works as Ben’s just as they discover that Ben has actually forged his own death. Elsie Hookley tries to thwart the trickle of her family’s inheritance to her brother’s children. Elsie develops her own project intended to show up her brother, marry off her protégé, the gold-digging Jerry Dulaine to eligible bachelor Collier McGrew. Elsie delights in the fact that Jerry, who was born a nobody, can network more successfully than her pinched brother. Another one of Elsie’s wards, Niggy, the male gold digger, strays from her plan when he decides to sleep with Elsie’s sister-in-law and marry her niece. Everyone is following the money, or at least the signs of money. The novel ends with the proposed demolition of the Julien, home to pretension and intrigue, seductions and negotiations, site of bourgeois bohemia.

complicates her position in relation to gold digging. She is at once gold digger and gold mine, and she unites sexually and socially the worlds of art and commerce. She figures in the artists' lives as a legend and Dalzell first longs "to meet her if only to be in on the joke" (Powell, *Wicked* 166), to be inside the artists' circle. That Cynthia possibly "represented Art itself to him, and her kiss was admission ticket to the world of immortals" (Powell, *Wicked* 167) while in the very next line she represents the World and access to millionaires, suggests that Powell is deconstructing traditional associations of woman with art. Powell exposes the contradictions in cultural images that affect women as they try to negotiate identities in relation to or apart from such images. Cynthia appears to be a cultural cliché—the rich and bored nymphomaniac—but the tensions between her roles as muse, benefactor, girlfriend, and gold digger actually illustrate the complexities of the subject-object dialectic as it applies to women.

Powell unpacks the misogyny behind the term gold digging by showing it as a force pervasive in all levels of society, practiced by both genders and people of all sexual orientations. Lou Donovan has married Mary because of the benefits her family connections will bring to his business dealings. Lou is eager to let people know that he has married into an influential class, suggesting his worthiness by association. He proudly asks one of the prospective investors on his proposed resort: "did I tell you my wife's uncle has a big show-place down there, not far from your

spot? Judge Minor B. Harrod.” The name produces the desired effect: “‘Oh, yes,’ said Rosenbaum, impressed. ‘I know of him, of course. Your wife a Harrod?’” (Powell, *Angels* 28). Although the anti-Semitism common in America at this time precludes Mary and Mrs. Rosenbaum from meeting in the resort, Mary’s Boston roots have eased Lou’s transactions by making him familiar. This notion of familiarity is central to doing business; one will invest in what is known or related, because of the trust factor. Lou feels like an outsider when he is actually among Mary’s refined family but he alludes to his relation to them when the opportunity arises. Lou’s marriage for prestige is simply one example of a reason for gold digging; it is different in degree, not kind, from the gold digging of the young homosexual “choreographer, poet or percussionist” who goes home with one of the wealthy females in *The Locusts Have No King* and is “willing to forget his sexual preferences in exchange for her Scotch” (Powell, *Locusts* 164).

Powell’s novels illustrate the expansion of the gold-digging chain in response to shifting economic circumstances and gender roles. The chain develops a third level or even multiple levels: the “gold digger” acquires wealth, status, or other resources from a sugar daddy; a third party or parties then trade sex, fame, companionship, or another form of cultural capital for support from the gold digger. Not only does the gold digger reinforce communities of men; she acts as a link between disparate communities. Cressey suggests that many immigrant patrons of

taxi-dancers may have viewed their relationships with the girls as a way to assimilate and enter American culture. Although Cressey concludes that this would not be successful because the taxi-dancer herself is too much of an outsider (Cressey 174), the idea indicates that the gold digger is not so much a marginal figure, as a border figure. She has the ability to traverse boundaries, and possibly, the ability to smuggle others through them. She is an intermediary, a middle trader: "Jerry Dulaine, who knew everyone, learned by listening, introduced Ideas to Capital, shuffled contacts personal with contacts professional" (Powell, *Wicked* 66), epitomizes the gold digger as literal site of exchange. Whereas the courtesan could conduct philosophical and intellectual exchanges in a salon, the gold digger provides an equivalent service for the commercialized culture of the early twentieth century, more often than not in a public setting. The gold digger always seems excessive because she is not a primary producer. However, her function reflects the tendency of modern consumer capitalism to accumulate, conglomerate, and interpenetrate.

Niggy, the gigoloesque figure in *The Wicked Pavilion* is unabashed about his gold digging. He articulates the conundrums of gold digging that many female gold diggers experience: they never have to pay for their entertainment, they receive luxury items as compensation for their time, their charm, their sex appeal, but they are cash poor:

“I worked nights in a garage up on the West Side,” he said. “But damn it, Elsie, I can’t go around with nice people, visit their homes and all that, maybe go on pleasure trips with them, if I have to drudge away in some dirty garage. A fellow’s just got to get his hands on cash to keep up. Nita’s been nice enough, letting me drive her car, letting me have some of Wharton’s clothes—whatever isn’t too big for me, passing out a ten-spot now and then, but I’ve got my future to look out for.” (Powell, *Wicked* 229)

Niggy’s concerns echo those of one of Powell’s consummate female gold diggers,

Jerry Dulaine:

[f]or the past five years—Jerry was not thirty-four—she had lived perilously on the brink of disaster, but she had lived well and still clung to the brink. It was still a good show....But Jerry was beginning to wonder. How much longer could she keep it up and where was it leading? Instead of the game being easier it was getting tougher. She was calling up more men than called her up and, worse yet, some of these gentlemen belonged to the older and lower part of her ladder. (Powell, *Wicked* 67)

The similarity of her quandary to Niggy’s and her parallel assertion that “with her increasingly extravagant tastes she really could not afford to work” (Powell, *Wicked* 65) emphasizes the inadequacy of traditional meanings of work in the given the economic climate. In effect, both Jerry and Niggy have translated their expensive tastes into a consumer practice that is a form of work, a sort of production. The categories of labor and consumption can no longer be treated as distinct. Simmel, in *The Philosophy of Money*, sees this blurring of boundaries as affecting the conceptions of identity and personality:

...labour power has become a commodity. Where the worker works with his own materials, his labour remains within the sphere of his own personality,

and only by selling the finished products is it separated from him ...The fact that labour now shares the same character, mode of valuation and fate with all other commodities signifies that work has become something objectively separate from the worker, something that he not only no longer *is*, but also no longer *has*....The process by which labour becomes a commodity is thus only one side of the far-reaching process of differentiation by which specific contents are detached in order for them to confront the personality as objects with an independent character and dynamics. (456)

The ways in which Niggy and Jerry maintain their lifestyles challenge conventional definitions of work. They represent the other side of the commodification of labor, which makes work of consumption. Both Jerry and Niggy have become aware of the brevity of the gold digger's glamorous career, realizing the importance of youth in the gold digger's array of wares and exchange tokens. Niggy sees marriage—a path frequently chosen by many gold diggers whose prime is nearing its close—as the only solution to this dilemma. Despite her growing desperation, Jerry, unlike Niggy, perceives “settling for the safety of marriage...[as] the final defeat, synonymous...with asking for the last rites” (Powell, *Wicked* 65). Some gold diggers, however, use marriage to insure against fates such as that of Dinah Brand. Lorelei, for instance, chooses to marry Henry Spoffard as a security measure in face of society's prejudices against non-young women. The timing for a gold digger to marry must be just right: she must not be deteriorating in her looks or sexual value, yet she must not blindly accept the first offer.

Becoming a wife, however, does not mean that the gold digger must give up her identity as gold digger: the gold digger consumes the role of wife into her own practices. Becoming a consumer-producer inside the domestic realm offers new opportunities and techniques for the gold digger. In Anita Loos's *But Gentlemen Marry Brunettes*, Lorelei, the ur-gold digger sets a precedent. Rather than exchanging her gold digging for wifehood – she incorporates the two roles, or develops a method to be constantly substituting one for the other, shifting for maximum benefit. She rationalizes, in her understated style that she has married and become a mother “[b]ecause I am very fond of ‘kiddies’ and when a girl has married a wealthy gentleman like Henry, Motherhood is even more beautiful, especially if it turns out to look like ‘Daddy.’” The reader gets the cynical, most economically viable reason as one of Dorothy’s epithets: “And even Dorothy says that ‘a kid that looks like any rich father is as good as money in the bank’” (Loos, *Brunettes* 129–30). In her role as wife, the gold digger becomes a producer, as well as a consumer. That the gold digger is the vehicle for the reproduction of the father indicates that she is not an aberration of society. While she may, at times, be an outsider, she is actually complicit in reproducing society’s terms: a rich son who might marry and have a mistress or who might marry a gold digger.

The term “money in the bank” seems to be a crass inversion of the idealized portraits of motherhood that circulated in popular discourse at the time. It further



reveals, however, the economic function behind marriage that is frequently disguised by the discourse of romantic love. Although Powell's novels contain few examples of mothers, they take up the issue of domestic gold digging. In addition to the cited example of hypergamy—marrying for upward social mobility—Powell's *The Wicked Pavilion* offers up an economic discussion of marriage as remunerated labor and of procreation as capital gain. As in Loos's novel, Powell has the gold digger's savvy female (non-gold-digging) sidekick point out the possibilities of advancement in marriage:

“You don't realize what a future there is in marriage....Why I've seen women without looks and with no talent for anything else be perfect geniuses at marriage. They really clean up. You marry your man, pop a baby right off the reel, enter it in Groton or Spence on its christening day, have the father set up a trust fund for it right off with you as guardian, get your divorce, marry the next guy, pop another baby with trust fund, repeat divorce and same deal all over. Finally you're living high on the income from four or five trust funds, without lifting a finger.” (70–71)

Even without the baby as money in the bank, the marriage can still be handled “like a big merger,” Elsie tells Jerry. “After all a girl like you has a lot to offer and you expect top price. A man like McGrew needs a woman like you and you need a man like him” (71). The references to marriage in Loos's and Powell's texts are teeming with economic diction. The rationalization of marriage as supply and demand, an exchange of values is amusing but also pointed comment on bourgeois artifice. The irony of Elsie's comment that Jerry does not realize the future in marriage plays on

bourgeois expectations for women. Although women were performing more work outside of the home in both conventional and unconventional realms, the expectation for American women was that they would marry. Women were (and continue to be) conditioned to view marriage as equal to their future. The ease and fluidity with which gold diggers are able to move into marriage (if they desire), as they would move into a new evening gown, illuminates marriage as being positioned *within* the field of consumption. One of Jerry's "colleagues" demonstrates how the gold digging lifestyle gets translated in marriage: "Tessie had jumped from her play-girl career straight into a kind of super-respectable suburban life. It had to be super because \$15,000-a-year husbands must live religiously on \$25,000 in the excessively conventional manner demanded by wives who had been models, receptionists, or hat-check girls." For Tessie and many other gold diggers, however, marriage does not simply signify the final negotiation of a career: "After a few years of this struggle Tessie had run away with a jazz drummer, worked in the chorus line of whatever nightclub he played in, working her way down to the Lido in a determined effort to go to hell, after he left her. She was glad to start over again...and she was shopping around now for a glossier respectability all over again" (Powell, *Wicked* 236). Tessie is a gold digger who is addicted to the climb, the opportunity to exercise social mobility, to always seek better, even if in order to climb, she must start at the bottom again.

Gold digging exposes the sanctity of marriage as a bourgeois veiling of an institution that, in the twentieth century, is implicated deeply with consumer practices. Just as Georg Simmel, in writing about money, seems compelled to make analogies out of romantic and sexual relationships, Jean Baudrillard draws instinctively on Lévi-Strauss's principle of marriage and kinship to explicate his theory about consumption being a language, "a set of operations aimed at ensuring a certain type of communication between individuals and groups...the basic function of the regulated circulation of objects and goods is the same as it is with women or words: ensuring a certain type of communication" (Baudrillard, *Consumer* 79). Baudrillard here suggests, albeit opaquely, the complicated interactions between women and objects and between women as objects and men. While Baudrillard makes clear the structural similarities of these two systems, what he leaves unsaid is that these two systems actually work in tandem. Any apparent distinctions in the terms are collapsed in the systems' functions.

Amanda Keeler Evans, one of the central characters in Powell's *A Time to Be Born* exemplifies the figure of the gold-digger/wife.<sup>20</sup> She can play the role of

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<sup>20</sup> *A Time To Be Born* focuses on Amanda Keeler Evans and Vicky Haven, two childhood friends. Vicky Haven has spent her life in Lakeville. She co-owns a successful real estate business, rents a family from her brother, and has had her heart broken by Tom Turner for the last time. She sells her share to her partner, who betrayed her with Tom, and decides to move to New York to avoid repeating the pattern as well as to avoid paying outrageous sums for the privilege of being policed, harassed, and insulted by her brother and his family, in whose home she lived. With some help from a friend, Vicky receives an offer from a childhood acquaintance, Amanda Keeler Evans, who has married a media

respected wife of and elegant hostess for eminent newspaper publisher brilliantly and heartlessly, and exploits her position to the full extent. One of the first glimpses that the reader is given into Amanda's personality is that "[s]he was really quite free with Julian's [her husband's] money, mischievously so, knowing how sacred it was to him, almost as sacred to herself when earned her own living writing advertising for Burdley's Department Store"(Powell, *Time* 17). Amanda's ambition is fleshed out quite wickedly within pages:

At thirty Amanda had all the beauty, fame and wit that money could buy, and she had another advantage over her rivals, that whereas they were sometimes in doubt of their aims, she knew exactly what she wanted from life, which was, in a word, everything. She was at this period bored with two years of fidelity, but she dared not risk her marriage just yet. Julian was necessary for at least another few years, and it would be folly to risk losing him. Julian was almost pathologically jealous of her, fearing the final indignity of horns, and never able to forget that she had surrendered to him before he even asked the favor, a fact that did not reassure him of her future fidelity. He queried

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magnate and installed herself as a famous writer, to stay in a studio. Amanda, of course, intends to use the studio for her own passionate liaisons with Ken Saunders when Vicky is at work at the Peabody magazine, a position Vicky also attains through the Evans connection. Throughout all this connection-making and rendezvousing, Ken and Vicky manage to fall in love, a secret they must keep from Amanda, and Vicky learns how to negotiate the social commerce that is New York society. Her acquaintance with the Elroy daughters—an acquaintance cultivated by the Elroys once they figure out Vicky knows Amanda—provides her with a window into the society lifestyle which involves shopping, debutante parties, and marrying well. The Elroys belong to the social register but pretend to work at Peabody's in order to increase the magazine's social cachet. This acquaintance also introduces Vicky to Uncle Elroy, the girls' main benefactor, who is instantly smitten with Vicky, a fact that causes the Elroy girls to call her a gold digger. In the meantime, Amanda schemes for greater power and fame, not having need of more money and growing bored with her team of ghostwriters. Amanda's grasping ambition brings about her fall: her humble origins are exposed and not given the positive spin she envisioned, she loses Ken to Vicky, her husband and his media empire as a result of her infidelity, and is relegated to obscurity, likely, a fate worse than death for her.

chauffeurs about her movements, put sly questions to her friends, but Amanda's conduct was so far impeccable. If she was restless now, it was not that she wanted an affair for lust's sake, for she had a genuine distaste for sexual intimacy and hated to sacrifice a facial appointment for a mere frolic in bed; but there were so many things to be gained by trading on sex and she thought so little of the process that she itched to use it as currency once again, trading a half-hour in bed for a flattering friendship, a royal invitation; power of whatever sort appealed to her.

Julian was suspicious of just such a state of mind as this and now speculated which one of their dinner guests had inspired Amanda to put out her glamour-girl side. (Powell, *Time* 24–25)

Like many women in the thirties and forties, Amanda has sought out financial security in marriage and attained it. However, this marriage is not the satisfactory end of a gold-digging career but a stage within it as well as an opportunity to make more contacts for her "career." In essence, Amanda is no longer gold digging because she has "all the beauty, fame and wit that money could buy." Through her marriage, Amanda has been able to transfer her gold digging practices to another realm: the quest for power. Amanda is no longer exchanging sex and her sexual desirability for money, jewels or furs but she is still treating it as currency; she is still negotiating and investing. Amanda is despised both within the text *A Time to be Born* and by the text. Whereas many of Powell's other gold diggers are characterized indulgently, Amanda is demonized for her cold-hearted calculation. Why is this gold digger-wife, who wields so much more power and influence than the other gold diggers, treated so spitefully? Amanda is frequently interpreted as being based on Clare Boothe Luce, something Powell has both denied and admitted. The review of

the novel in the *New York Herald Tribune Books*, 6 September 1942, concludes by alluding to the similarities between Amanda and Boothe Luce: “if you think you recognize the beautiful Amanda who sprang full-armed for front-page news from the love-befuddled brain of the publishing Zeus, who is to say you nay?” (Feld VIII)

The review in *The New York Times* compares the acerbity of the novel to Clare Boothe’s play “The Women.” The edition in which the review appears, 31 August 1942, also contains an announcement that “Mrs. Luce Decides She Will Seek Nomination as Congress Candidate,” suggesting new venues for the ambitious career woman to pursue and in which to be demonized.

Powell, like Loos, usually treats her gold-digger characters with humor and affection. The typical Powell gold digger is perhaps naughty, perhaps vain, and always ambitious but she does not usually inspire hateful misogyny. The texts of Loos and Powell establish the gold digger as a comic figure, quite frequently related to the figure of the naïf. By linking the gold digger to the satirical naïf, the text makes her process palatable and amusing and enables the reader to accept her good-naturedly without sacrificing cultural comment. Amanda, on the other hand, is extraordinarily conscious of what she is doing and the implications thereof. Amanda is also dangerous because she enjoys power more than luxurious commodities. The exchange value of sexuality, which Baudrillard describes as “no longer symbolic, but either economic and commodity-based – prostitution in all its forms –

or...conspicuous sign-value – ‘sexual status’”(Baudrillard, *Consumer* 150) is acceptable when the terms are similar or related. That is women’s sexuality and consumer commodities can be exchanged because they exist within the same register. Power belongs to a different register of exchange.

While the gold digger often uses marriage as a part of or a finale to her career practices, she can also set herself up in opposition to a wife, when convenient,. For instance, in *Angels on Toast*, Ebie remarks to the exotic gold digger, Trina Kameray, “After all, you can’t blame the wives – it’s not their fault they’re always getting left at home” (Powell, *Angels* 35). One could ask: why *are* the wives always getting left at home? The sugar daddies in Powell’s novels are most frequently seen with their gold-digger companions when they are in company with other men. The gold diggers are seen as inherently welcome in these outings with the colleagues; they function as assets to the business of pleasure and pleasure of business that are the purpose of these social engagements while the wife is bad for business. Very simply, a gold digger indicates that a man can afford at least two women. The gold digger is always representing excess. She herself is a luxury, an accessory. A gold digger on the arm of a man also signifies that the man has potential beyond the bourgeois norms, a necessary quality for the man who aspires to something higher than middle manager. These women locate a disruption in the dichotomy of the public and the private spheres. Veblen’s theory of vicarious, conspicuous consumption places the wife in a

role as domestic consumer-manager. The gold digger is not the opposite of the wife but rather a substitutable object that will at strategic times further increase her male companion's perceived financial success. Gold diggers are allowed a certain laxity to party, drink, and joke with the men, perhaps seeming at times to penetrate the boundary of the men's network but they are still rarely admitted. While the punishment for Dinah Brand's attempt to transgress the limitations imposed on her as a woman seems harsh and unrealistic the warning lingers. Despite the gold diggers' free and unrestricted movement in the 1940s and 1950s in public places where men congregate, they still cannot join the club on an equal basis.

Within Powell's New York novels, however, there are signs that men are not the only ones who are associating for friendship and business advantage. While Lorelei and Dorothy are inseparable playmates, the extent of their relationship rarely goes beyond covering for each other and helping each other out of predicaments. Their relationship is constructed as a friendship, not as anything having economic cachet.<sup>21</sup> The relationship between Jerry Dulaine and Elsie Hookley parallels and expands upon the relationship of Lorelei and Dorothy. In each pairing, there is one

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<sup>21</sup> In their article "Pre-text and Text in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*" in *Issues in Feminist Film Criticism*, Lucie Arbuthnot and Gail Seneca present an interesting reading of the women's relationship to each other in Hawks's 1953 film version. They read the women as subverting "the objectifying male gaze," by gazing at and touching each other during musical numbers to suggest that their connection with each other is deeper than any of their connections with men. The film adds plot developments not found in the novel in which Russell's character "perjures herself in court to protect" Monroe's character.



woman (Lorelei/Jerry) who is the gold digger, who has the looks and charm to attract the men, while the other woman, who has less sex appeal, (Dorothy/Elsie) acts as a sidekick. Elsie, however, is more than Jerry's sidekick. She is her business partner. The mention of Wharton's plan to set up an Elsie Hookley Travelers' Aid fund is both ironic and suggestive of how conditions for young working women changed over a few decades. Travelers' Aid societies were established to prevent girls and young women who were new to a city from turning to gold digging or occasional prostitution to survive (Meyerowitz 120–22). Elsie aids Jerry in becoming a successful gold digger. The two women have a business relationship; Elsie has a financial and personal interest in Jerry's snagging of a rich beau. Jerry previously was in league with another gold digger, Tessie, but that ended when Tessie married. Elsie supports Jerry behind the scenes, invests capital in her gold digging, letting her charge two hundred dollar dresses to Elsie's account at Bergdorf's and getting Jerry into exclusive clubs and parties. Although Elsie presents her motive behind financing Jerry's expenditures as stemming from her desire to show up her brother Wharton, the women's relationship is actually quite complex. There is within it the aspect of the mother-daughter bond, such as when Elsie probes Jerry with the accusing question "You're sure you remembered not to sleep with him?" (Powell, *Wicked* 79), and certainly there is an apparent difference in ages. There is also the sense that as she loans Jerry money and buys her expensive outfits, indeed "plac[ing] no limit on what

Jerry demanded for her proper setting” (Powell, *Wicked* 81), Elsie becomes Jerry’s benefactor or, illustrating the limitations of the term, her sugar daddy. As well as the maternal overtones to the relationship, there is an intimate subtext, a suggestion of a sexualized relationship between the two women. “Boston marriages”—where one woman would provide economic support for another in a sexual relationship—and gold digging among lesbians were not new practices in the forties and fifties (Meyerowitz). Certainly, they existed in all lesbian communities and Joanne J. Meyerowitz provides evidence that some lesbian gold diggers in Chicago in the 1920s “depended on higher-paid or wealthier women to support them” (Meyerowitz 114). While Elsie is ostensibly desperate to see Jerry well settled, she actually hinders Jerry’s chances by her presence: “Elsie financed you to a party designed to settle your whole future, then she queered everything by attending it.” The women’s intimate knowledge of each other abruptly seeming strange in the context of a social gathering is likened to “summer lovers suddenly popping up in winter clothes” (Powell, *Wicked* 81–82).

When Jerry hints at a sexual relationship with any man other than the target, Collier McGrew, Elsie evinces disapproval tinged with jealousy. Her censure is first expressed as concern for Jerry’s personal safety: “[h]e might be a ripper or a lunatic” (Powell, *Wicked* 88), and then as a loss of a financial asset: “it was downright asinine for a girl of Jerry’s potentialities and opportunities to throw her body and brains

around as if there were plenty more where those came from” (Powell, *Wicked* 91).

Both phrases ring with Victorian connotations, suggesting Elsie views her protégé as sexual property. When their business liaison finally fizzles, Elsie acts like a spurned lover who does “not try to define exactly how Jerry had hurt her feelings but hurt they were....she would give her eyeteeth to know what Jerry was doing without her”

(Powell, *Wicked* 225–26). Powell’s depiction of the relationship between Jerry and Elsie, in many ways, homosocial, differs from previous examples of such dependency between women because of the commercialized context it is given. The corporatization of such a relationship between women places it on a different register. It normalizes it in the public discourse; business associations are always logical, readable, understandable, and palatable in modern consumer capitalism.

Powell’s novels depict a culture in which even the romances of the purest sentiment are not completely devoid of monetary consideration. This is a world in which gold diggers are audited by the United States government and “a man is as rich as his credit and a lady is as glamorous as her hat”(Powell, *Wicked* 19). This is a world where getting credit and spending money does not actually require possessing money. Jerry is from a

. . . world without trust funds, no windfalls from forgotten relatives, no estates to be settled, no wills to fight, no salary, no family, yet a world illuminated with vague opulence. . . . It couldn’t be that Jerry was merely a shrewd manager for she was always tipping grocery boys in dollar bills for bringing up a quart of milk, or handing out five dollars to a taxi driver and

saying to keep the change . . . 'I figure that anybody in a three-thousand-dollar mink coat hasn't got any right to be waiting around for eighty-five cents change from a cabby.' (Powell, *Wicked* 58–59)

Jerry Dulaine's relationship to money is treated as mysterious and somewhat perverse. She is, in a sense, self-made, not having inherited anything. But she also does not work in the traditional sense: her income cannot be called a salary. Jerry's attitude to managing money, while it may not reflect the domestic ideal promoted in women's magazines like *Good Housekeeping*, actually reveals great insight into money and its role in American culture. Through examining the practices of gold diggers like Jerry, *The Wicked Pavilion* exposes the contradictions within the tendency of American culture to embrace the democracy of consumption while constantly devising new signs and symbols by which to read social and financial positions. The novel emphasizes that, like gold digging, modern capitalism relies not only on performance but also upon a complex system of mysteries and assumptions. Conspicuous consumption is a game of signs; like successful advertising that never shows the actual product, gold diggers often manipulate appearances to belie reality. The gold digger is one of those

...girls everybody seems to know or ought to know, whose names invariably euphonious or amusing, ring a very faint bell and rather than admit ignorance, the businessman assumes she is a débutante, the débutante guess she is an actress, the actor deduces she must be rich, all credit her with distinction in some field of which they are ignorant. With no letters of introduction she builds a kind of social security for herself simply on the importance and

dignity of her escorts. Here was democracy . . . a joke on the bourgeoisie.  
(Powell, *Wicked* 60–61)

Powell's social worlds where people from all backgrounds, of all social statuses mingle and preen suggest Baudrillard's idea of a consumer society, that is, a society where consumer practices evoke and inhabit the empty term that is democracy:

The 'Revolution of Well-Being' is heir to, or executor of, the Bourgeois Revolution, or simply of any revolution which proclaims human equality as its principle without being able (or without wishing) *fundamentally* to bring it about. The democratic principle is then transferred from a real equality of capacities, of responsibilities, of social chances and of happiness (in the full sense of the term) to an equality before the Object and other *manifest* signs of social success and happiness. This is the *democracy of social standing*, the democracy of [consumer goods], the car...an apparently concrete but, in fact, equally formal democracy which, beyond contradictions and social inequalities, corresponds to the formal democracy enshrined in the Constitution. Both of these, the one serving as an alibi for the other, combine in a general democratic ideology which conceals the *absence* of democracy and the non-existence of equality. (Baudrillard, *Consumer* 50)

The gold digger is both a part of the ideology that maintains the appearance of democracy and a rupture in the ideology's surface. She is, in many ways, self-made, a businessperson, and her visible enjoyment of consumption contributes, perhaps *establishes*, her value as a social asset. She is also, however, a blatant reminder that consumption is a game. And while perhaps she is an expert player, another part of her appeal is her projection, onto her body, of the artifices of consumer culture. The objects that a gold digger accumulates are indeed valuable in terms of their market value. But they are valuable to the gold digger as a collection, which is always about

self-identity; individual gifts and individual givers are interchangeable. These objects are like the profits of a business which are re-invested. The gold digger's realm of investment is herself, but a self that is produced through a series of consumer choices.

Baudrillard discusses the use of objects in society as signs:

In actual fact, it is not even true that consumer products, the signs of this social institution, establish [a] primary democratic platform: for in themselves, and taken individually (the car, the razor, etc.), they have no meaning: it is their constellation, their configuration, the relation to these objects and their overall social 'perspective' which alone have a meaning.

And that meaning is always a distinctive one. They themselves, in their materiality as signs (their subtle differences), reflect that structural determination ...they obey the same social logic as other institutions, even in the inverted image they give of that logic. (Baudrillard, *Consumer* 59)

Almost all the characters, not just the gold diggers, in Powell's New York novels are constantly communicating on this register. Everything is given a price in *Angels on Toast*, from the "natty extraordinarily aquamarine-colored suit for fourteen fifty" (73) that Truesdale buys and the "dollar steak luncheon" (80), to Mrs. Vane's "seventeen-dollar-a-week room and bath at the Ellery" (81).

Powell's New York novels are a detailed study of the complex system of consumption "as a process of signification and communication" (Baudrillard, *Consumer* 60). According to Baudrillard, the most important part of consumption is not the objects themselves but the signs. Consumption, in his terms, is a language within which humans play. Powell's New York texts are about a form of conspicuous consumption that has gone beyond Veblen's theory. They are about

appearances and the reification of appearances in a culture. According to Baudrillard's *The Consumer Society*, "it is industrial monopoly concentration which, *abolishing the real differences* between human beings, homogenizing persons and products, *simultaneously ushers in the reign of differentiation ...it is upon the loss of differences that the cult of difference is founded*"(89). As labor and commodity are confounded in the realm of identity, the tiny meaningless differences are emphasized as markers of personality.

There are at work within these novels the subtlest forms of differentiation. When conspicuous consuming can too easily be mimicked, one "maintains his privilege absolutely by moving from conspicuous to discreet (super-conspicuous) consumption, by moving from quantitative ostentation to distinction, from money to culture." (Baudrillard, *Consumer* 55). This is not to imply, however, that culture can somehow avoid being influenced by the logic of consumerism. The society girls in *A Time To Be Born* illustrate this super-conspicuous discreet form of consumption that they embody in the lifestyle magazine at which they have taken jobs:

...a somewhat woolen note crept into the hitherto shimmering copy. Economy was a word fraught with imaginative nuances. Many of the Peabody League girls and their illustrious mothers were absolutely refusing to wear their jewels or sables for the duration, and mere working girls were easily detected now by their fur coats, having no alternative of well-cut cloth wraps as their richer sisters did. (179)

Dawn Powell's New York texts satirize the society where "[t]he solution to social contradiction is not equalization, but differentiation" (Baudrillard, *Consumer* 94).

In these contexts, it becomes more difficult to pinpoint the gold diggers, not because they have disappeared but because their practices have pervaded culture at all levels, in all contexts, in multiple subjects. The gold digger no longer represents a discrete category but a mode of existence that has infused and informed other categories of earning money/making a living. Dodo is perhaps the only character in all the Powell novels who functions unilaterally as a gold digger. In a bit of apparent irony, the savvy gold digger Jerry Dulaine reinvents herself as a media personality, "working on a television program about problems of career girls" (Powell, *Wicked* 276). In fact, Jerry's new job signifies, along with the growing importance of television as a medium, the role that the gold digger plays *in* the problems of career girls. The categories of career girl and gold digger blur and intertwine. While both Dinah and Lorelei were diversified in their gold digging strategies, the "gold diggers" in the forties and fifties actually are hybrids of gold diggers and career women. Ebie, Jay Oliver's girlfriend, appears as a gold digger to Jay's best friend Lou, though not to Jay: "Jay thought she wasn't a gold-digger because she had gone to Art school and made her own clothes and asked for loans instead of out-and-out presents. You couldn't tell him anything" (Powell, *Angels* 7). The reader is not so sure. There is the mystery of her elegant apartment and good address and the text never divulges



exactly how much of Ebie's expenses are paid by Jay and how much is a result of her jobs as a commercial artist. Ebie is a hybrid—both dependent and independent.

Trying to determine whether Ebie is a gold digger or not is actually beside the point.

The ambiguity of her position is key to understanding the ambivalences women felt in the 40s and 50s about their choices between men/romance/domesticity and career, ambivalences promoted by the era's cultural discourse. As a commercial artist, Ebie actually embodies the tension between two other apparent contradictions. In effect, Ebie's job is metaphorical. The challenge of being both commercially successful while remaining an artist is a theme that recurs throughout *The Diaries of Dawn*

*Powell: 1931–1965.* Powell writes on 2 May 1931:

I'd go on plugging on at the nurse novel only I dread doing another 'Women at Four O'Clock' – shallow, phony, pretentious writing with tricks. Better never to write anything – take a job in the movies. I will not cheat myself so as to start a novel in which I do not believe. Let it be lousy when it's finished. That's different. But, to save my soul, I hope I never have to undertake a big novel with no faith in it or myself. (Powell, *Diaries* 27)

Powell asserts that she will not sell out her writing but sees working in film as a separate sphere. She later acknowledges how important material success is to her, stating that "I've never gotten over my surprise of owning what I do – and with each added convenience comes an accompanying passion for hanging onto it. Certainly I would be stirred to even a Hollywood job if there was acute danger of losing this apartment, these servants, the piano, etc." (Powell, *Diaries* 59) The position of

commercial artist has special resonance for a female character. Powell confronts the stereotypical modernist notion that high art is viewed as masculine while popular, mass culture is feminized, and as such less valuable (Huysen 44). Powell works this assertion at the level of popular culture and suggests reasons that women's work is denigrated by this system. Her glib note that "[w]omen seem to me the greatest opportunists, the most unscrupulous artists in the world – they turn any genius they have into money without a pang – whereas the man artist, supporting his family by distortions of his genius, never ceases to bemoan his lost ideal," (Powell, *Diaries* 31) is given ironic significance by the diaries' constant references to bills that Powell is paying for her son, the dentist, and her husband's speakeasy expenses.

Whether in relation to their artistic or marital practices, the culture, Powell suggests, constructs women as gold diggers if they display financial ambition: "[m]en forgave genius or a *succés d'estime* but her financial advantage infuriated them" (*Locusts* 124). Even Vicky Haven, the sweet, hard-working career girl in *A Time to Be Born* is interpreted as a gold digger when she attracts the attention of one of her co-workers' rich uncle. Vicky Haven actually does become adept at another register of the language of consuming after moving to New York, learning that "in New York introductions were like cash, and were not to be thrown about but used only when absolutely necessary" (Powell, *Time* 106). This clever phrasing asserts that meetings have an economic value while also playing upon the idea of credit. One does not pay

up front if one need not. A person acquires and trades on the basis of other qualities and signs that they have mastered. One is constantly, therefore, exchanging bits of oneself, on oneself, for oneself, problematizing even further the notion of identity in consumer society. Reading the signs to determine who has money becomes a complex, hermeneutic exercise. Money and its signs are constantly shifting, being de-stabilized. The wealthiest looking playboys have all their expenses covered by their poorer companions and secretaries are appalled and embarrassed when the person for whom they have been ghostwriting makes public her humble origins. Appearances are everything. Lorelei's initial horror at the thought that paste can look like diamonds is transformed when she uses the fake gems to fool Lady Beekman and keep the real diamonds. Dodo's less happy encounter with fakes illustrates the power of the simulation in the consumer society. When she discovers that her millionaire beau has given her false jewels and artworks and asks him why, Uncle Lex responds "Why, I always give girls presents from the Five and Dime and they never know the difference" (Powell, *Locusts* 249). The difference between the fake and the real cannot be discerned and indeed is inconsequential.<sup>22</sup> Value is collapsed onto the surface and resides in how the object is read. The gold digger has to adapt in a

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<sup>22</sup> The appearance of being able to tell real from fake diamonds, however, denotes cultural cachet. Women's shows and magazines frequently show fake jewels and pearls to reassure women that they do not need the real thing. These spreads are often accompanied, however, by information on how to

society that produces the perfect simulacra, where commodities and persons are exchanged for and against each other on the same economic register.

Powell's novel of 1962, *The Golden Spur*, treats many of the same themes that her other New York texts do but through a somewhat nostalgic lens.<sup>23</sup> *The Golden Spur* uses this perspective to link the popular images of women that are offered up for consumption to economic trends. An aging writer discovers the secret of keeping her writing current with the economic flux:

“You remember your theory about updating my old stories? The switch, you called it. Making the heroine the villain and vice versa? You said they would sell in a minute that way....You said in the old days the career girl who supported the family was the heroine, and the idle wife was the baddie...And now it's the other way around. In the soap operas, the career girl is the baddie, the wife is the goodie because she's better for *business*...Well, you were right. CBS has bought the two you fixed, and Hollywood is interested...”(Powell, *Spur* 112)

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discern the real thing and perhaps a highly radiant picture of the real specimen, creating contradictions in their messages.

<sup>23</sup> In *The Golden Spur*, Jonathan leaves Silver City to come to New York in search of information about his mother and the identity of his real father. With a few addresses and names, Jonathan begins his research in a bar, the Spur—as it is known to regulars—a tact that inspires him to be mistaken for one of the many who are “doing yet another thesis on the twenties and thirties.” Jonathan finds the remaining members of past bohemian circles—that may have included his mother—such as Claire Van Orphen, the aging author trying to update and sell her stories, Alvine Harshawe, playwright, Earl Turner, writer; he also meets and takes up with “bohemians” contemporary with his generation. These characters parallel the previous generation in their pursuit of symbolic and real capital. Lize and Darcy, for instance, seek vicarious fame through sleeping with various artists like Hugow, while Hugow tries to ingratiate himself with potential benefactors like his agent Cassie Bender and the women she can introduce to him. Jonathan gets caught up in such circles: he falls in love with Iris and does not mind that Hugow, his new best friend, has also had intercourse with her. Jonathan becomes absorbed by the intertwining relations of his mother's acquaintances and his own. His search for his father leads him to many possibilities and no certainties. Jonathan's search evolves into a different type of quest for identity, one that proves exceedingly profitable.

The implication is that attitudes toward working women are inextricably bound up with what advances business in any given economy. The simplicity of the switch reveals that the positions have no greater meaning to capitalism other than how they can be used and co-opted and made into cultural values through entertainment. By juxtaposing all these attitudes about career women and gold diggers, Powell's novels unpack the contradictions that confound and create female identity in mid-twentieth-century America.

Does a new millennium necessitate a new terminology and a new definition for a gold digger? One journalist has suggested that the new gold digger is the inevitably sophisticated and inevitably female PR consultant. Publicists are the latest examples of the socially undistinguished to marry their way into fame, money, and royalty. The PR agent is a professionalized party girl with all the respect of a career woman and all the brilliant managing strategy of a traditional hostess-wife, gone large scale. The female PR agent may be the next metamorphosis of the gold digger, because, after all, "the rarest of all things in American life is charm. [Americans] spend billions every year manufacturing fake charm that goes under the heading of 'public relations.' Without it America would be grim indeed" (Loos, *Hollywood* 99).

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