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Excerpt

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## *Introduction: “Buying into womanhood”*

Why did the girl – the girl at the “awkward age” – come to dominate the American imagination from the nineteenth century into the twentieth? By way of answer, this book looks at the way in which women fictionalized the process of “buying into womanhood”; at how, during the rise of consumerism, they envisaged for the girl reader and others the ways of achieving a powerful social and cultural presence. I explore why and how this scenario of buying into womanhood became, between 1860 and 1940, one of the nation’s central allegories, one of its favourite means of negotiating social change. The exemplary novelistic scenario here is that of the “backwoods” girl-heroine who achieves a love-match with a successful but disillusioned middle-aged businessman. In managing this, the girl also manages, in concentrated symbolic form, to enact the progress of fifty years. She moves from a modest, rural background to urban, monied display. The girl allows fiction – and the culture generally – to perform a series of otherwise awkward maneuvers: between country and metropolis, “uncouth” and “unspoilt,” modern and anti-modern. While her gender identifies her as malleable, her youth symbolizes the vitality of an earlier America. She serves to mitigate the perception that the modern age is, to adopt the terms of the period, “artificial.” Her “breathless audacity” stands in contrast to the “weightlessness” and “blandness” of a systematized and incorporated nation. As William Dean Howells observed from his “Editor’s Study,” the “real” child was required to improve the “spoiled child” that the American adult had become.<sup>1</sup>

The girl – and above all, the middle-class girl – could serve as the vehicle for both nostalgia and optimism. In doing so, she became pivotal. Henry James noted that she was the key figure in a newly consumerized world. Such was her importance, such was her “exposure” indeed, that James ventriloquized her consequent fears and resentments:

How can I do *all* the grace, *all* the interest, as I'm expected to? . . . By what combination of other presences ever am I disburdened, ever relegated and reduced, ever restored, in a word, to my right relation to the whole?<sup>2</sup>

The girl provides a centeredness within the chaos of modern abundance. She, as James puts it, provides “*all* the grace.” Center-stage and larger than life, she is not to be restored to some more modest “right relation to the whole.” This is a tricky position, and hence her fear. She must provide a liberatory “audacity,” while also assuring the presence of “grace.” That is to say, she must move between the possibilities of disruption and containment. The very mobility that makes her so useful for negotiating change is also what makes her dangerous. Again one thinks of James here, of Daisy Miller and the comment that Daisy “was composed of charming little parts that didn't match and that made no *ensemble*.” The girl represents both the possibility of coherence (of “ensemble”) and the threat of incoherence. She shifts between childhood and adulthood, and this instability seems to activate anxieties over the transmission of values from one generation to another. As Lynn Wardley notes, the incoherence of Daisy Miller's “flirting with anyone she can pick up” raises the possibility of “affiliation across the constructed borders of race, ethnicity, gender, and class.”<sup>3</sup> If the middle-class girl cannot be made to perform the rites of social continuity, she may become the representative of a variety of dangerous new coalitions. Her volatility becomes a metaphor of class, racial, and ethnic uncertainty; the possibility of “fixing” her coalesces with the possibility of resolving such social uncertainties. Daisy Miller is one example of the girl's important function, and of the price that must be paid for getting it wrong.

The girl, then, is instrumental to articulating and assuaging the fear of social change. Her growing up can naturalize change and make it seem more manageable. But what, precisely, were the changes that she was deployed to manage, and why did juvenile fiction become the means of this deployment? I want now to introduce some key terms and contextual reference points, namely those of consumerism, class, agency, race, and gender, and then to place the girl in relation to the emergent social-sexological discourse of adolescence. I subsequently offer a chapter-by-chapter outline of how these issues are developed in relation to the fiction.

To begin with the rise of consumerism, the historicist perspective is that advanced capitalism destabilized traditional markers and values of class. The centralizing of production drew people away from static, rural hierarchies, and a newer, more fluid social currency evolved. In an otherwise confused and unregulated social arena, the urban bourgeoisie used their

*Buying into womanhood*

3

money to locate themselves in “communities of taste.” Social demarcation came to depend on what Jean-Christophe Agnew has referred to as “cognitive appetite,” as the newly enriched white collar and business classes asserted themselves via a showcasing of self and home. This was an upward spiral: growth in production and consumption enabled the rise of the middle class, who in turn confirmed their rise through consumption.<sup>4</sup>

The middle class, then, is understood to have emerged from amongst the relatively low “middling sorts,” who emulated the gentry. Clearly, though, actual change was more various and uneven than this would suggest. Among many complicating factors, the emergence of a middle class occurred in the larger towns and cities in an age when most people still lived in small towns and in the country. As a result, the interchange between country and city comes to be experienced as a class dynamic, as the dominant caste of a static rural society encounters the values of an ascendant and more mobile urban stratum.<sup>5</sup> Fiction became a crucial tool for representing and accommodating this interchange. Indeed, Richard Brodhead has argued that it was this growing inequity that caused regionalist writing to become a dominant genre after 1865. Small, local cultures and economies were challenged by the rise of “translocal agglomerations.” Regionalist fiction served a “memorial function”: it defended older, rural and small-town values whilst also integrating these same values into the emergent order.<sup>6</sup> While I find Brodhead’s argument persuasive, I think his regionalist material is quite narrowly class-ed. His key example, Sarah Orne Jewett, was taken up by highly selective “literary” journals and publishers, and was not a bestseller on the scale of the writers I discuss. I would argue that girls’ fiction was much more important to the management of such temporal disjunctions. Girls’ fiction was often preoccupied with the same “adult” social anxieties as much “adult” fiction, and it was girls’ fiction that became the key exhibit in the debate as to what fiction should and should not attempt to represent. Given its immense popularity, and its careful but insistent engagement with class-formation and social change, girls’ fiction became the most significant instantiation of realism in fiction. Likewise, it served as “antidote” to the less acceptable, naturalistic forms produced by Dreiser, Norris, Crane, and Sinclair.

But if much adult fiction – by men and by women – mediates consumerism and social change, why is women’s fiction for girls of particular interest? The clue lies in the relation between gender and consumerism. Mary P. Ryan and subsequent social historians have explored the ways in which the emergence of the middle class depended on a domestic economy and its ideological bases. The “middling sorts” could secure their newer

and higher status by marrying later and investing their economic and emotional resources in fewer children. The simultaneous narrowing and intensification of family life was instrumental in enabling and reproducing middle-class identity.<sup>7</sup> The greater wealth of the smaller, delayed family meant that wives and mothers were increasingly recast as non-productive, domestic beings. In the culture of “conspicuous consumption” of the latter part of the nineteenth century, the middle-class woman’s role was to put in evidence her husband’s earning capacity, to serve to manifest consumerized class values. As Charlotte Gilman Perkins put it in *Women and Economics* (1898), woman became “the priestess of the temple of consumption.” Or, in the words of a more recent cultural historian, the middle-class woman became a “consuming angel.”<sup>8</sup> This is the context within which the scenario of “buying into womanhood” achieves its pre-eminence, as the girl’s development comes to include – and even to be centered around – the acquisition and management of spending power. I want to develop this further, but first let’s introduce one final complicating social factor. Girls’ fiction came to prominence during successive waves of immigration, of Irish, Chinese, Germans, and Japanese. Its inception as a dominant form was also contemporaneous with African–American emancipation. At times the fiction manifests a strong sense that the right to wealth was under threat, in that it was to be contested by ever more new arrivals. The fiction often tries to work out an accommodation of relations between a preponderantly white Anglo-Saxon Protestant middle class and an anomalously “foreign” other or others. Sometimes this takes a relatively benign form, as the girl extends sympathy and guidance to the foreign other (one thinks of the aid that the March girls provide to the Hummels in *Little Women*). At other times there is a much more aggressive fictional projection of white fears and wishes, as with the anti-Japanese girls’ fiction by Gene Stratton-Porter. But whether the interaction is benign or aggressive, there is always a deeply engrained racial and ethnic aspect to the fiction’s articulation of social and financial power.

We are left with a complex layering of elements – social, economic, gendered, generic, racial – all of which should inform and give nuance to the analysis. Given these various and contending factors, the formation of class ideologies under advanced capitalism comes to seem improvisatory, and for this reason numerous theorists have warned against using overly fixed or epochal terms. Raymond Williams, in his classic essay, questions labels such as “feudal,” “bourgeois,” and “socialist,” because they suggest too static a historical sense. He urges “residual,” “dominant,” and “emergent” as terms that suggest “the internal dynamic relations of any actual process.”

*Buying into womanhood*

5

He reminds us that hegemonic definitions are always in negotiation with alternative perceptions, both residual and emergent.<sup>9</sup> Certainly this study will bear out the need for a fluid and microcosmic understanding of class-ed experience. But a related and equally difficult question here is that of how to relate our class-ed and consumerized concepts to subjective experience. Or in other words, how does the historical emergence of consumerism relate to the agency not of a class, but to the idea of the individual girl? It is often assumed that consumerism is necessarily bound up with deception. Advanced industrial capitalism generates a crisis of overproduction that can only be alleviated by an endless growth in demand. The subject must orient his or her subjectivity in relation to the commodity spectacle, to the extent that he or she identifies happiness with a purchasable range of goods and services. As Baudrillard points out, the subject's desires are at least as important as his or her labour power.<sup>10</sup> There is then a process of "ideological blinding" at work, whereby the subject's "own" desires become hopelessly tied into the requirements of supply and demand. The girl's perceived innocence and her perceived need of instruction meant that the issue of agency appeared in a particularly sharp and interesting form. Through her we see that consumerism was and is an especially effective means of discipline and control precisely because it seems to liberate and empower. The world of consumerism can create a misleading aura of female agency, in which the girl's powers are ambiguous. This is especially the case because the girl is being prepared for the marriage "market" that will initiate her into adult life: in her the boundary between consumer and commodity becomes blurred. The process of buying into womanhood not only provides the ideological foundation for the girl's identity, but it also transforms her into something to be bought. Her education in consumerism, in other words, produces her as a commodity to be consumed.

In relation to the characters and the readers of girls' fiction, we need to keep in mind the question, is the girl buying, or is she sold? The argument that I have outlined here is strongly Foucauldian. The perceived incoherence of the adolescent girl is initially managed by figures of authority (parents, authors), but that authority is internalized as the girl learns to manage this incoherence via acts of consumption – ultimately the consumption of a notionally coherent white, middle-class identity. This argument, though, might be opposed by the many instances in girls' fiction in which buying into womanhood is represented as an opportunity for individual expression, and for a performative self-awareness. Rather than seeing consumerism as "ideological blinding," it might be viewed positively as a means for creativity and self-expression, and also for containing within itself the possibility

of critique. The “progressive obsolescence” of consumerism can serve to de-essentialize the forms and meanings of desire and pleasure, leading to a “loosened” or “decentered” subjectivity. I want to pursue this possibility that a performative concept of self can emerge, and otherness and expressiveness can thrive alongside – even because of – one’s immersion within the capitalist infrastructures of modern subjectivity.<sup>11</sup>

A further key concern here must be to understand what the perceived nature of girlhood was in this period, that it could be seen as instrumental to managing social change. Why was the girl significant? We return at this point to Daisy Miller, and to the girl’s perceived volatility. The fiction focuses on the “awkward age” of girlhood, which is seen to extend between the ages of fourteen and twenty-four. This awkwardness and its importance is explicitly described in another new “genre” of the period, the social-sexological discourse. The “awkward” girl became known as the “adolescent” girl, and she was discussed in a growing number of treatises from the 1870s onward. G. Stanley Hall would draw on these many studies in his own magisterial two-volume work, *Adolescence: Its Psychology and its Relations to Physiology, Anthropology, Sex, Crime, Religion and Education* (1904). For Hall as for many others, adolescence was the key to social stability, and to the maintenance of white, middle-class authority. He perceived adolescence as a period of immense physiological change and consequent psychological disturbance, a period that he describes – tellingly in an economic metaphor – as one in which “loss exceed[s] profit in the chemical bookkeeping of the metabolism.”<sup>12</sup> As the body develops and as motor power and functions change, the child’s psychic traits are thrown into disarray. Hall’s adolescent, like Jo March and a host of subsequent fictional heroines, is unstable, absorbed by reverie, and moves swiftly between various contradictory attitudes. He or she is intensely self-conscious, and tries out a variety of social possibilities in the assumption of different roles, poses, affectations, and mannerisms: adolescence is a “dramatic” period, and one that seems a physiological instantiation of Williams’s dynamic of dominant, residual, and emergent. But Hall argues that while these changes and instabilities may always have occurred, they had been intensified by the middle-class behaviour patterns of the mid to late nineteenth century. As we have noted, the emergent bourgeoisie tended to marry later and have fewer children as a means of managing expenditure and enhancing their power and status. Hall drew attention to this, and argued that it led to the over-nurture of children and consequently to an extreme adolescent precocity. Further, Hall identifies the new intensity of adolescence with other aspects of modernity. Metropolitan life, with its “early emancipation,” its

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[More information](#)*Buying into womanhood*

7

many stimuli and its absence of rural exercise, produced a more marked adolescent phase, with its “dangers of both perversion and arrest” (I, p. xv). The “tumult” of modern adolescence, as represented by Hall, could lead to a dangerous social promiscuity, in that during adolescence “the critical faculties are often hardly able to supply reductives of extravagant impulses,” and there is a consequent tendency to “idealize unfit persons” (I, pp. 269, 270).

All this takes us back to Daisy Miller’s “extravagance,” her wandering outside the confines of her class and gender. But we might ask, why the girl and not the boy? The phase of adolescence was seen to affect boys as well as girls. Indeed, to some extent adolescence takes the form of a conflict of genders within each boy and girl:

Not only in the body, but in the psyche of childhood, there are well-marked stages in which male and female traits, sensations, and instincts struggle for prepotency . . . The fact that both sexes have in them the germ of the other’s quality, makes it incumbent upon each to play its sex symphony with no great error, lest the other be more or less desexed in soul . . . It is one important office of convention, custom, and etiquette to preside over this balance between the relation of the sexes at large.

Hall acknowledges an instability and even arbitrariness in the assignment of gender, in that arrival at one’s “correct” gender depends to some extent upon social influences. But we should be careful not to overstate this. Hall and nearly all of his sources see gender as preponderantly determined by biological sex. Indeed, Hall takes to task a “Miss Thompson” for “ascribing sexual differences . . . to the differences of influences that surround the sexes in early years” (II, p. 565).<sup>13</sup> According to Hall, only Thompson’s “feministic” tendencies could have led her to such a false conclusion.

Above all, Hall attaches significance to the adolescence of girls. He thinks it is especially worthwhile to monitor girls, because he thinks their education an important contributory factor to modern social ills, and because, more generally, change manifests itself first and foremost in women. He cites Beard’s famous treatise, *American Nervousness* (1881) to this effect, that “the first signs of ascension or of declension are seen in women” in the same way that “the foliage of the delicate plants first shows the early warmth of spring, and the earliest frosts of autumn.” In girls and women, Beard, Hall, and others argued, one could see the first “manifestation of national progress or decay” (II, p. 571). Although adolescence is a similarly “tumultuous” experience for boys and girls, Hall parallels fiction in developing a special focus on girlhood. Much as it is Daisy who threatens the established order

with her extravagant affiliations, Hall notes that it is girls that are “most prone” to “idealize unfit persons.” This is because in them the “affective overtops the intellectual life,” a notion that Hall attributes to his sense that in girls and women the “[s]ex organs are larger and more dominant.” The girl’s and ultimately the woman’s physiological sex causes her to be more incoherent, to experience “psychic reverberations” that are “dim, less localized, more all-pervasive” (I, p. 270; II, p. 562). This leads Hall to stress the importance of the girl to the maintenance of white, middle-class authority. He does this particularly in relation to the widely perceived problem of “race suicide.” Drawing on a variety of sources, Hall describes a situation in which the birth-rate is decreasing among white middle-class women, due to a “voluntary avoidance of child-bearing” (II, p. 579). These women have been led astray by “excessive intellectualism,” overindulgence, and “excessive devotion to society.” They have developed an aversion to “brute maternity” (II, p. 609). It is only the “constant influx of foreigners” that has prevented a “steady decadence of birth-rates,” as when “the best abstain from child-bearing, then the population is kept up by the lowest.” Not only does Hall raise the fear of falling white middle-class birth-rates and the effect on white middle-class predominance. He also raises the fear of cross-racial affiliations, which will intensify problems yet further. A mingling of races will, he suggests, increase the “ferment” and “instability” of adolescence by “multiplying the factors of heredity” (I, p. 322; II, p. 574). As for achieving a higher birth-rate among the “best,” Hall advocates the delay and attenuation of girls’ education. If, however, women “do not improve” in their attitudes to child-bearing, it may be that there will have to be a “new rape of the Sabines” (II, p. 579).<sup>14</sup>

Hall is one example of a variety of discourses – scientific, educational, religious, and fictional – that betray an anxiety over white middle-class authority, and he is characteristic in that his anxiety comes to center on the adolescent girl. But Hall is also useful because he gives us the clue as to the importance of girls’ fiction. From within his own relatively new “genre,” he hails the equally recent arrival of girls’ fiction. He stresses the point that by the turn of the century “ephebic literature” had developed to the extent that it should be “recognized as a class by itself, and have a place of its own in the history of letters and in criticism.” Adolescence had “what might be called a school of its own” (I, p. 589). In other words, modernity has precipitated adolescence in ever more extreme forms, and a literature has emerged to recognize and deal with this fact. For this reason, Hall advocates that adolescent literature should be “prescribed” as a “true stimulus and corrective” (I, p. 550). Literature is aware of and responding to the



*Buying into womanhood*

9

contemporary problems delineated by Hall. But Hall also makes important discriminations between the sexes here. He believes that women write better about adolescence than men. This is partly because women, given Hall's perception of their unlocalized and pervasive sexual biology, never entirely escape from adolescence (Hall hypothesizes that women "depart less from this totalizing period" and so "dwell in more subjective states" [I, p. 546]). This in turn enables them to recapture the adolescent subject in their writing. Men write less vividly about adolescence, and their efforts are less "confessional," less "personal." Rather, men's writing on and for adolescents is more oriented to "reconstructing the political, industrial, or social world" (I, p. 563). Hall also observes that this axis of gender is reflected in the reading tastes of boys and girls. Citing several reports on children's reading, he notes that "boys read twice as much history and travel as girls and only two-thirds as much poetry and stories." This demonstrates to him that "the emotional and intellectual wants of boys and girls are essentially different before sexual maturity" (II, p. 476). Both boys and girls go through a "craze for reading," and this "greatest greed" occurs between fifteen and twenty-two (II, pp. 477–8). However, girls read more fiction – they have a "special interest" in fiction that begins with adolescence – and while girls will read boys' stories, women writers appeal more to girls, and male writers to boys. Indeed, "the authors named by each sex are almost entirely different" (II, p. 477).<sup>15</sup>

Publishers, writers, and readers as well as social scientists assumed a natural and inevitable division of readerships, in which the idea of the woman writer was conflated with that of the female character, and in turn with the girl reader. It might seem that, in proposing a study of women writing fiction about girls for girls, I am making – or at least acquiescing in – the same essentialist assumptions. Whilst it is a matter of fact that the majority of fiction for and about girls was indeed written by women, it is crucial to question the tidily "natural" appearance of this fact. For instance, many of the novels that I analyze were not simply the bestsellers of girls' fiction, nor the bestselling of children's fiction, but the bestselling of all fiction and all literary forms. The barely disguised truth is that men and women were avid readers of what was conveniently called girls' fiction, and fiction that was ostensibly for girls was more broadly used to debate and to come to terms with economic and social change. Equally, we should not accept too readily that this fiction is "about" girls in any reliable, authentic way. In keeping with Jacqueline Rose's discussion of "the impossibility of children's literature," there is always a distinction to be made between the actual child – whoever and whatever she may be – and the ideological child,

the child as embodiment or projection of adult needs and desires. One of the main motives ascribed to the production of girls' fiction was that it could help to create the very girl that it was ostensibly about. While this attempt at influence seems to have met with some degree of success, there are also numerous instances of girls as "resisting readers": there was often a gulf between the prescriptions of girls' fiction and the actual meanings that girls took from their reading. Also, it would be a mistake to assume that girls' fiction is an essentialist and uniformly prescriptive genre in the first place. Although women writers did acquiesce in the supposed naturalness of their writing for and about girls – and their motives are of interest – we will find that within this assumed naturalness they offer all kinds of hesitations, deviations, and choices. Even as women undertook through their fiction the role of ensuring that girls did indeed buy into womanhood, they also gestured toward the performative aspect of girls' lives, and toward the alternative expression that girls and others might find within and to one side of their consumerized empowerment.

It might yet be asked, though, that if gender is ideological and performative, and if that recognition is embedded in the fiction, is it not counter-intuitive to isolate a genre that was heavily associated with one gender alone? Does it not seem to re-naturalize both gender and genre? Also, it is already apparent that I resist my own logic, with references to male writers such as James, and to non-fictional discourses such as Hall's. I do not want to isolate girls' fiction in such a way as to re-naturalize it, but I do think its qualities and its place are sufficiently important to merit a sustained analysis. More particularly, girls' fiction performed a function that other genres and discourses could not. It constitutes a very cohesive canon, manifesting recurrent concerns and strategies. The goal is not only to explain the function of girls' fiction, but also to explain why girls' fiction performed this function and not, say, James's fiction. To offer some initial thoughts here, a major aspect of this ideological utility lies in popularity. Girls' fiction is written in an accessible, everyday language rather than in the "special language" of poetry or in the demanding syntactical structures of James. The everyday aspect is carried through into the material, in that girls' fiction is seldom exotic, but invites a close and sustained identification between reader and character. Yet fiction is also an escape from the reader's immediate circumstances, and in girls' fiction especially it is a prolonged escape, with numerous sequels and serials. Fiction, then, is a supremely useful tool because it is accessible, and it grants repeated and lengthy access to the reader. Furthermore, like consumerism itself, fiction both empowers and constrains: it empowers because it permits the reader to assume other