

Introduction

In the latter half of the nineteenth century, the number of lower-middle-class women working in shops and department stores largely increased as commercial business in London flourished.¹ In the early years of the Victorian period, most retail shops were small and shopkeepers, often craftsmen themselves, sold goods produced on the premises (Mitchell 65). With the advent of urbanization, railways, and factory production, significant changes occurred in the retail trades, shops grew larger, and the department store emerged as a new place of business. Under such circumstances, a new kind of employee became quite common: the shop assistant. Among all the shop workers and associates, the ‘shopgirl’ became a pivotal type of laborer, a “transitional subject” situated in the very middle of the commodity and the consumer (Sanders 27). She formed a new category, which designated the tendency of “girling” of shop assistants during the late Victorian era (Sanders 20). In addition to the heavy, hard labor known as “shop-slavery” (a familiar phrase of the period), a shopgirl’s main task was to mediate the process of selling and buying in the way of commodity-display (Sanders 5).² As a highly debated figure of the commodity culture, the shopgirl was inevitably involved with her contemporary ideologies of class and gender. Specifically characterized by youth and desirable femininity, these shopgirls were predominantly living without parental supervision in urban areas for the convenience of work (Sanders 20).³

¹ The positions for shop assistants and their number have dramatically increased as the business grew so fast with industrialization; the number was estimated at one million or more until 1907 (Sanders 19). According to the historical and social analysis of shop assistants, the members of the National Amalgamated Union of Shop Assistants (NAUSA) claim that “No other class of workers” was considered “at once so numerically strong and so economically poor” (qtd. in Sanders 19). Being a shopgirl then became a common occupation for lower-middle-class women.

² Shop-slavery designates the hard working condition, long working hours, and low wages of the shop assistants. In 1884 it was estimated that female shop assistants had to stand behind the counter for between 75 and 90 hours per week for wages of between 15 pounds and 50 pounds a year (Holcombe 109).

³ As for the living condition, half of the shop assistants’ pay was deducted for board and lodging. Some considerate employers might provide a room for shop assistants either on the store’s upper floors or in nearby lodging-houses. Because shops were open for very long hours, young workers

They worked to make themselves visually attractive, often displaying fashionable merchandise, in order to seal transactions with consumers. These young and beautiful shopgirls, usually in their late teens or early twenties, were causing sexual and moral tensions.

The resemblance between the shopgirl's body and the commodity being sold has been made in the activities of consumption. The shopgirl's display of the commodity beckoned an ambiguous identity since she seemed to side with the commodity much more than with the consumer. For the shopgirl, the commodity was, and had to be, revealed and marketed through her body. Such association was likely to parallel her body with the commodity and to emphasize the alienated labor practice of her body. Thus likened to commodities, shopgirls were often devalued in terms of their 'object-like' bodies. And the most significant place concerning such discourse is where the shopgirl practiced her labor—the department store.

The department store plays a central part in the rapid development of commodity culture. During the first half of the nineteenth century, the department store's prototype was gradually formed, and later it witnessed a series of changes in accordance with the process of industrialization and urbanization.⁴ Since the department store began to function as a major locus of contemporary consumption, it surely attracted quite a number of people from different backgrounds (women as the majority) while accommodating large crowds of consumers and workers. In this sense, it is a public space because it offers great anonymity.⁵ In another sense, it creates a phantasmagoric effect stimulating perceptions and senses of the body

did not have to walk home in the dark. Although the system could be exploited by mean-spirited employers, living in the upper floors or nearby had many advantages, especially because the majority of shop assistants were between the ages of sixteen and twenty-two (Mitchell 66).

⁴ The history of the department store can be traced back to the Great Exhibition of Crystal Palace in London's Hyde Park. For more about the history of British department store, see Sanders 59-62 and Lancaster 7-15.

⁵ According to Lancaster, there were not so many people visiting the department store until the Bon Marché, the first department store in Paris. The Bon Marché offered a new type of liberty, which is to say, "Anyone could enter, browse in departments, wander from floor to floor, without spending a centime" (Lancaster 18). This liberty thus contributed to the anonymous feature of the space.

through various commodities. A visual spectacle through a specific display sets a consumer's desire in endless motion. Its spatiality imparts a suspicion of the shopgirl as a displayed commodity bound to the conditions of capitalist production. The shopgirl's body is viewed as both passive and objective, thus making the spatiality of the department store seemingly compelling and oppressive for her.

Yet a shopgirl's experience is more than that. Henry James's protagonist, Millicent Henning in *The Princess Casamassima*, is a typical example of the late Victorian shopgirl, who had a position "at a great haberdasher's in the neighbourhood of Buckingham Palace" (IV, 66). She is in the department of jackets and mantles, and what she needs to do is to "put on all these articles to show them off to the customers" (IV, 66). Despite of the exhausting and time-consuming nature of the work, the department store also provides shopgirls with new opportunities to participate in the public space: for instance, to see and to know other people, or to become familiar with the operation of commodity culture. Invested with prevalent commercial logic, Millicent, is nonetheless stimulated with pleasure and gains insights from her experiences of displaying in the department store. Three aspects concerning the shopgirl's particular displaying body will be explored in this paper: how the discourse of consumption impact on the role of the shopgirl, how the spatiality of the department store situates the shopgirl, and how the shopgirl takes advantage of her working experiences to gain knowledge of commodities and crowds and to develop her special visions.

The Shopgirl as Commodity

The emergence of the shopgirl has been associated with the inauguration of the commodity culture. Shopping as the new consumer activity in the nineteenth century profoundly changed the social relations between people and objects as well as those among people. Women's ventures into the commercial culture came from

the initial need to purchase goods for their family, yet participation was inextricably reproduced and complicated by experiences of consumption, which created new urban perspectives. As Mary Louise Roberts observes, there came into being twofold roles of women in sites of consumption: “woman was inscribed as both consumer and commodity, purchaser and purchase, buyer and bought” (Roberts 818). These two terms can be used to describe women’s roles in the commodity culture: woman-as-consumer and woman-as-commodity.

As for the woman-as-consumer, with the birth of consumer culture women are assumed to be more engaged with consumption than men and more hungry for commodities—all things that “indulged the body and enhanced physical life” (Kowaleski-Wallace 5).⁶ More than merely purchasing goods, female consumers are naturally, “pleasure-seekers” (Rappaport 5), excessively being “voracious” and “superfluous” produced by the urban consumer culture (Sanders10, 24), and female appetites for commodities are perceived as “a sinister force threatening male control and endangering patriarchal order” (Kowaleski-Wallace 5). Female consumers are taken as a powerful paradoxical figure since they arouse the debate on the practice of consumption. Women as consumers are sometimes depicted as disorderly followers of commodity and sometimes emphasized as “a negotiator in a sophisticated cultural activity,” “an activity imbued with sociability, pleasure and the application of skill” (Walsh 174, 157). In such highly debated consumptive activities, the shopgirl, in stark contrast to her customer, certainly plays the intricate role of woman-as-commodity more than woman-as-consumer.⁷

The idea of woman-as-commodity (or the shopgirl-as-commodity) has

⁶ Kowaleski-Wallace argues that it is the eighteenth century that yields a keener understanding of the foundations of contemporary cultural practices. She focuses on women’s appetite towards goods and the configuration of their bodies in relation to consumption, a feminine activity. For more about the eighteenth-century consumption, see Kowaleski-Wallace.

⁷ As for the role of the shopgirl, Rita Felski treats her as the “pre-modern” woman, who is “completely free of the consumption to consume” (72), whereas Sanders argues that the shopgirl acts as the “paradigmatic consumer” (Sanders 11). The latter seems to be more accepted in the existing scholarship of shopgirls.

increased in conjunction with an active presence of female consumers in the commercial space. Middle and upper class female consumers wander in the shops and department stores, and become targets for shop owners. Employers attempt to seek out female employees who they suppose may more effectively serve the needs of the female consumers. Employer's supposition is predicated on a conception of feminine consumer desire that "incorporated identification through fantasy" (Sanders 23). The shopgirl displays merchandise for a customer insofar as she "embodied the projected fantasy image of possibility" (Sanders 23). There comes into existence the "female sympathy" between the female consumer and the female seller (Sanders 23). This process of female sympathy depends on an implicit gendered identification between the shopgirl and her customer: she offers the customer some trendy information about what a woman wants—"the arrangement of colours, the alternative trimmings, the duration of a fashion" (qtd. in Sanders 23). If the new commerce presently "made its appeal, urging and inviting them to procure its luxurious benefits and purchase sexually attractive images for themselves," as Bowlby claims, the shopgirl who sells in the way of commodity-display is undoubtedly the best advocate to represent this image (Bowlby 10).

This female fantasy and identification fosters the ideological construction of a shopgirl as a 'natural' image best suited to selling the goods. The shopgirl becomes what consumers are more likely to desire, resulting in the growing demand for the shopgirl in the late Victorian period. The shopgirl as an ideal shop assistant has been justified in the notion of consumption as a "female industry" (Sanders 25). Women fill the shopping sites, yet male assistants in the same place are "never to be found occupying easy":

We refer to those departments in the great shops, which are devoted to the sale of light articles of female attire. Why should bearded men be employed to sell ribbon, lace, gloves, neck-kerchiefs, and the dozen other

trifles to be found in a silk-mercens or haberdashers shop? (qtd. in Sanders 25-6)⁸

The ‘natural’ reason for the hiring of a shopgirl is not only to help the female consumer with her attire, but also to sell the things with her commodity-display body. The ideology of shopgirl-as-commodity is enhanced by positioning herself between the consumer and the commodity due to the gendered connection. The significance of the shopgirl lies in her ‘natural’ ability to fill the need of female consumers by demonstrating pleasant and spectacular effects of the commodities. Such ‘naturalness’ is undoubtedly ideological. Seen in this light, the shopgirl functions seemingly as an article or an object (the slight difference is without a price) in the market. Her value appears to be estimated in relation to the different kinds of commodities she sells, with her own agency concealed and transformed in the processes of circulation and exchange. Her existence is articulated through marvelous commodities, which seem effortless and lifeless in the character of objects.

Men’s established attitudes toward the shopgirl-as-commodity in connection with consumption can be found in another protagonist in the novel, Hyacinth Robinson. For Hyacinth, the commodity culture is unfriendly to a lower-middle-class man like him partly because of his poverty and partly because of his emphasis on spirituality over materiality. He is always wandering and watching the public scenes, “the great, roaring, indifferent world of London seemed to him a huge organization for mocking at his poverty” (XI, 169). Commodities for him, are the very “vulgarest ornaments” of “the windows of third-rate jewelers” (XI, 169). Those unaffordable commodities further move him to an indifference, consciously or unconsciously, of those displayed objects and a demoralization of

⁸ In an 1839 article entitled “Female Industry,” Harriet Martineau contended that “out of six millions of women above twenty years of age, in Great Britain, exclusive of Ireland, and of course of the Colonies, no less than half are industrial in their mode of life; more than a third, more than two millions, are independent in their industry, are self-supporting, like men” (qtd. in Sanders 24).

related persons and shops. Following the same lines, Hyacinth scorns the place which provides the material, depthless attractions and considers Millicent simply as an ‘ornament’ matched to her store “in the neighbourhood of Buckingham Palace (there was scarcely anything they didn’t sell in the great shop of which she was an ornament)” (XI, 166). He cannot come to terms with urban commodity spectacles; at the same time, he disdains the shop and those items in display: “Hyacinth laughed this establishment to scorn, and told her there was nothing in it, from top to bottom, that a real artist would look at” (XI, 166). He is unable to repeal its existence, but can only devalue it based on an artist’s spiritual perspectives. He speaks, in an ironical way, of Millicent’s daily contacts with the “freshest” products of modern industry (XI, 166). Though Millicent knows more about the shop and its articles, Hyacinth would condescend the value and “make her feel stupid” (XI, 166). By avoiding consumption and by labeling commodities as insignificant, Hyacinth’s consciousness is potentially falling into the gendered ideology that denounces the shopgirl and the activities of consumption.

To sum up, shopgirls were stressed to signify social danger and the blurring of boundaries of bourgeois morality. Under the logic of consumption, the shopgirl is considered as “a sham commodity and a counterfeit of respectable femininity” (Nead 98). Yet the notion that shopgirls behave like commodities, paradoxically, reveals the deficiencies of representations of her body. There is no describable position for her. Since she is never a substantial commodity, she is a new category that involves capitalist rational productions of commodities and those seemingly irrational consumers. The shopgirl’s role within the turn-of-the-century commodity culture has developed with the growing demand of the department store. Department stores, where the dominant discourse sees the shopgirl as a commodity, work as a new public space to define and categorize the cultural perception of this particular group of women.

The Spatiality of the Department Store

The history of British department stores dates back to the 1851 Great Exhibition. With all the amusements and exhibitions in place, the Great Exhibition, held at the Crystal Palace in London's Hyde Park, showcased miscellaneous categories of valuable objects: industrial designs, new inventions, fine art, and manufactured goods from all over the world.⁹ Marking the nascent form of the department store, the Great Exhibition was apparently the nineteenth-century's largest "monument" and "spectacle" (Richards 3). Following this event, department stores, originating from retail shops, developed along socio and economic activities of consumption, and furnished a favorite place of crowds (particularly women) in the "magic West End" (Rappaport 4). Department stores welcomed consumers by producing a particular culture of pleasure through dazzling visual commodities. Like the exhibition palaces, stores utilized new inventions in glass technology, making possible large expanses of transparent display windows. This specific visual effect of commodity-display is termed as the "display culture," which simultaneously works to define and regulate the shopgirl's function of displaying body (Sanders 56). In consequence, the exhibition and deployment of stores depended on well-established facilities to create "fantasy palaces" of this display culture (Nava 66). This was the very place of which Millicent bustled in and out every day.

Aiming at an environment of pleasure and attraction, department stores utilized the great inventions of light and glass that contributed to the window display of commodities. The first key interest was the growing dependence on artificial lighting. Until the invention of the electric light, stores constantly looked for alternative sources of illumination. Systems of lighting evolved as increase department stores increased in space; daylight was quite limited in such a huge building as a department store. While store size expanded in depth and height, its

⁹ For more about the Great Exhibition and the Crystal Palace, see Picard 213-33.

sophisticated display systems demanded greater illumination. The ordinary use of oil lamps was inadequate for department stores' business in the developing. Oil lamps were replaced by gaslights, which were served by growing labyrinths of small lead pipes that brightened the whole interior more efficiently. The risk of fires however increased as wood was often used for partitions and floors when extra stories were added (Lancaster 50). To avoid fires and to strengthen interior construction, stores employed fireproof materials, including iron frames and stone façades and equipped their stores with electric lighting. Displays of electric lighting were a popular novelty at grand expositions of the period and storeowners were quick to realize the display potential of the new bulbs. From the 1880s, department stores were gradually able to install lamps to create a dazzling hall of light as the municipal supply of electricity had been improved. Electric lighting transformed department stores into some nocturnal glittering spotlights in the city.

Interior visibility was improved by increased forms of artificial lighting. New types of fixtures and fittings, especially the glass of the window area and showcases, were also progressing quickly. Placing goods behind glass obviously added to their attractiveness and many stores installed windows that were similar in design to showcases (Lancaster 51). The plate glass was the most fundamental partition of stores before they had become department stores.¹⁰ The use of glass as displaying appliances was common due to the architectural insights of Frederick Sage, London's premier shop-fitter. Sage came to London in the early 1850s to work as a carpenter. In that same decade, he developed a range of new showcases with light frames and plate glass, which revolutionized British display methods (Lancaster 51). Glass cabinets of great ingenuity were developed for the display of gloves and novelties. The early method of placing large mirrors in dark corners to assist brightness and security was replaced by the emergence of the glass cabinet. Storefront windows became larger throughout the period thanks to the abolition of

¹⁰ For a history of window display of British and American department stores, see Lomax.

the glass tax in 1845 and the availability of cheaper and larger sheets of plate glass. Glass mattered distinctively for both buyers and sellers: for sellers, goods in a secure environment behind transparent glass could attract customers, whereas for buyers, they could look at commodities and compare them without obligation to buy (Nava 65). This shield of glass considerably provides a psychological sense of overvaluation of commodities for both sides of selling and buying.

Lighting and glass maximize a spectacular effect of department stores. Commodities, put in the limelight behind the glass, are always on show in an attractive guise.¹¹ The newest technologies of electric lighting and the show-window display techniques give the quintessential forms to the spatiality of department stores. The store itself is not simply a place with individual items for purchase, but “a permanent fair, an institution, a fantasy world, a spectacle of extraordinary proportion” (Miller 167). Going to the store thus becomes “an event and an adventure” (167). Activities of consumption involve part excitement, part leisure, and part pleasure. Its open and vast displays of goods produce and perpetuate consumers’ desires through visual stimulations. The department store thus appears as a phantasmagoric space, where the masses take glimpses of or wonder among a spectrum of luring, desirable objects in an enjoyable and fantastic mood.¹² It thereby transforms the more straightforward presentation of available goods into an atmosphere of abundant supply and consumer satisfaction. The department store where Millicent works near Buckingham Palace in *The Princess Casamassima* illustrates the contemporary Harrods department store in London.

¹¹ Many of the stores seem to have evolved from one of two models: the first (and most prevalent) was the drapers shop which expanded to include a wide array of goods beyond the usual supply of textiles, and the second was the grocers shop which later became the food hall of the burgeoning department store (Sanders 59).

¹² Harrods and Selfridges, arguably two of the most developed examples of the influence of consumption on everyday life at the turn of the century, occupied similar positions within British department store culture to the French and American prototypes. As Rappaport suggests in her researches on the West End department store, these new emporiums were devoted to the pursuit of pleasure, rearticulating the identity of the consumer through their description of the well-to-do female shopper out for a day of browsing in the stores, see Rappaport 3-15.

Harrods expanded from a small storefront in Knightsbridge to the massive institution of today. By 1867, Harrods had five shop assistants, a new storefront, and a plate-glass window, and by 1880, its staff numbered nearly one hundred.¹³ The fast expansion revealed its increasing scale and popularity of that time.

How department stores serve as a phantasmagoric space echoes with the ideology of the shopgirl as a commodity. Such spatiality is the working condition that results in the shopgirl's parallel with commodities in accordance with new technologies of shops. As glistening commodities, shopgirls' bodies with fine outfits were offered up to consumers "both as sexualized recipients of male desire and as mediators for female consumers' fantasies and identificatory pleasures" (Sanders 55). The shopgirl's displaying body, with its visual display emphasized by lighting and glass, behaves as an exact commodity-object in its expression. In this sense, the shopgirl's position was unavoidably impacted on by the spatiality of the department store as a sphere of feminine pleasure. The success of department stores normally reinforces the role of shopgirl as a means of commodity, implying "the role of woman as object" and that "the female body is a garment worn and paraded for a purpose" of selling (Parsons 58).

James's perceptions of the phantasmagoric spatiality of department stores are often rendered through Hyacinth's eyes. As Hyacinth went to the store to look for Millicent, he was so hesitated in three senses: first of all, he was not used to visiting that place: ". . . he hovered about the place a long time, undecided, embarrassed, half ashamed, at last he went in, as by an irresistible necessity. He would just make an appointment with her, and a glance of the eye and a single word would suffice" (XLVII, 422). For him, the better way might be that Millicent could come out to pick him up. He was unable to go in by himself. Secondly, he

¹³ Harrods, an institution which grew from a small shop into a great establishment dedicated to consumer luxury, modeled itself on a "British" system of benevolent paternalism toward store workers which nonetheless retained a strict and authoritarian managerial structure (Sanders 62). For more about Harrods' history, managements, and transformations, see Sanders 63-9.

knew that Millicent did not want him to be there: “He wrestled with the temptation to go into her haberdasher’s; because he knew she didn’t like it (he had tried it once, of old)” (XLVII, 422). The reason that Millicent did not want him to come might be that Hyacinth had once seemed to criticize her occupation. Lastly, the stores seem to have someone that supervises the shopgirl’s work as well as the consumers: “as the visits of gentlemen, even when ostensible purchasers (there were people watching who could tell who was who), compromised her in the eyes of her employers” (XLVII, 422). Hyacinth was the one who could not afford the goods in his appearance and who was afraid of being recognized as such. All these contemplations deferred him. He was not acquainted at all with the fittings and arrangements of the store, which appeared so unfathomable to him:

He remembered his way through the labyrinth of the shop; he knew that her department was on the second floor. He walked through the place, which was crowded, as if he had as good a right as anyone else; and as he had entertained himself, on rising, with putting on his holiday garments, in which he made such a distinguished little figure, he was not suspected of any purpose more nefarious than that of looking for some nice thing to give a lady. (XLVII, 422-3)

During his searching for Millicent, Hyacinth could not help observing those people who were engaged in the ecstasy of shopping and with which he might not get involved: “Here also were numerous purchasers, most of them ladies; the men were but three or four, and the disposal of the wares was in the hands of neat young women attired in black dresses with long trains” (XLVII, 422-3). Finally, Hyacinth found Millicent, who was exhibiting an article to Captain Sholto (XLVII, 423), and “In spite of her averted face he instantly recognised Millicent; he knew her shop-attitude, the dressing of her hair behind, and the long, grand lines of her figure, draped in the last new thing” (XLVII, 420-3). At the sight of Millicent and Captain Sholto, Hyacinth had an epiphany of how Millicent and he were different from

each other: “Millicent stood admirably still, and the back-view of the garment she displayed was magnificent. Hyacinth, for a minute, stood as still as she” (XLVII, 423). The two kinds of ‘still’ are distinct in meaning: Millicent’s stillness reveals charm and confidence, whereas Hyacinth’s reveal astonishment and embarrassment.

The phantasmagoria of the department store was most evidenced in its outside façade. The window display, highlighted by glistening glass and reflective lighting, renders the store an urban spectacle offering increasing attractions to more people and to the crowds on the streets. The department store is itself incorporated in the street spectacle since it is a spectacle in appearance, not only accommodating the crowds in its interior space, but also attracting the passers-by on the streets. Millicent, just as sparkling as the department store, signifies the exact product of the metropolitan material world that dazes and intoxicates urban spectators as well as consumers. Millicent models jackets and mantles and in a way is modeling the very department store where she works; on a macroscopic level, she is modeling—the glaring London city. Millicent, the department store, and London are all expressed as spectacles with features of vigor, brilliance, and magnificent appeals. Millicent is therefore regarded as “paralleling the concurrent rise and success of the department store itself, both the results of a conscious masquerade and paraded spectacle” (Parsons 58).

Evidently, the display-based culture of department stores contributed to the gendered ideologies on shopgirls’ bodies and confined them to the role of commodities. In the case of the late Victorian department store, the shopgirl was always imagined to participate in such luxurious consumption by mirroring female consumers and engaging selling strategies of sympathetic identification and desire (Sanders 55). In this light, the department store for shopgirls is never a source of pleasure, but is an enchanted glamorous ‘factory’ (by virtue of her links to commodity and of her exploited labor) where she reflects a fantasy image of the

female consumer behind the plate-glass windows. Therefore, the handsome interior of department stores and the irresistible ubiquity of commodity on show register the ‘dream-world’ effects on her appearances and behaviors.

However, the notion of the department store as a phantasmagoria may overemphasize the panoramic vision of the department store and may ignore the shopgirl’s potential agency in the commodity culture. For Millicent, the department store is not completely the place permeated with consumers’ fantasy or with various ideological forces antithetical to her conceptions and experiences. In spite of her vexed situation between consumers and commodities, the shopgirl’s practice of serving as a mannequin for the goods on display provides more opportunities to learn. In a social vein, shopgirls, to a certain extent, also derive knowledge from their daily access to the world of the commodity they sold despite the exploitation through overwork, low wages, and crowded working conditions. What they learn primarily from the department store is a lesson in commodities.

Millicent’s passion for the commodities was inaugurated from her childhood because she possessed an avid “attachment” “to any tolerable pretext for wandering through the streets of London and gazing into shop-windows” (IV, 65-6). The department store provides her the unique space to become familiar with the commodity. Her work of displaying stylistic jackets and mantles keeps her in trend with the newest products. She is quite learned in choosing articles for the purpose of work as well as for her own enjoyment. She develops her own taste and perspective while wearing different pieces of clothing. This development of taste and perspective wins her the admiration of customers. Millicent, as a shopgirl, sees these items from the viewpoint of customers and from that of sellers and in this sense, is more sensitive to the effect that the commodities are there to give.

Although those lined-up fashion and beauty shops excite Millicent just as they do others, she is still so ‘professional’ that she can tell what is worthy and what is not:

Happily she shared Hyacinth's relish of vague perambulation and was still more addicted than he to looking into the windows of shops, before which, in long, contemplative halts, she picked out freely the articles she shouldn't mind having put up for her. . . Nothing that he could say to her affronted her so much, for her pretensions in the way of a cultivated judgment were boundless. (XI, 166)

Sometimes Hyacinth would pronounce "the objects of her selection hideous" and "make no scruple to assure her she had the worst taste of any girl in the place" (XI, 166), Millicent does not quite care about his sarcastic comments on her taste. She believes in her experiences of qualities of goods: "When once in a while he pointed out a commodity that he condescended to like she stared, bruised him more or less with her elbow, and declared that if any one should give her such a piece of rubbish she would sell it for fourpence" (XI, 167). Unlike Hyacinth, a commodity despiser, or other consumers indulgent in diverse commodities, Millicent is quite clever and keen of judgments on the values of commodities. In the eye of Hyacinth, Millicent is a person who continues to "admire the insipid productions of an age which had lost the sense of quality" (XI, 167). Yet we may find that Hyacinth's demoralization of commodities, in some degree, oversimplifies Millicent's practices with distinctive goods, because of Millicent's more familiarity with the commodity culture.

Familiarity with commodities further teaches Millicent the importance of visual stimulation. Both those commodities on display and the department store as a street spectacle of lighting and glass contribute to the sensually visual effects of the modern commodity culture. Commodities on display aim to stimulate consumer's perceptions and senses through visual attractions. Devices of lighting and glass explain the significant role of vision, which is readily the most dominant form of commodity culture. Through this display culture, Millicent learns how commodity spectacles lure consumers; or in other words, Millicent learns the

manipulating method the store employs to invite consumers. Ordinary consumers are interested in and exposed to the visualization of commodities, whereas Millicent's vision of this logic of sensual attraction raises her above the relation between consumers and commodities. Those underlying associations concerning commodities and crowds can be seen and perceived from her position. Established as an urban spectacle, the department store is the best place that shapes her experiences of such urban modernity and it propels her to utilize the logic of commodity display.

Although the gendered ideology of consumption permeates the department store, it is never simply a completely homogenous space. Millicent's knowledge of commodities and its logic is precisely cultivated through her specific labor of displaying in the department store. The shopgirl may be criticized for her high publicity and appealing femininity, she is also allowed to experience public life that is interwoven into the sites of consumption. More than a place of work, the department store provides her with opportunities of pleasure and of social observation. The department store becomes a natural epitome of London material life for the shopgirl. The department store is thus, a space full of knowledge, which enables her to produce certain perceptions and experiences under the ideological constraint.

The Shopgirl's Dual Visions

The two-fold spatiality of the department store has revealed the shopgirl's contested identity in the commodity culture. Yet the shopgirl's displaying body presents an example of body subject, or Elizabeth Grosz puts, a "lived body" (Grosz 18). The concept of the 'lived body,' which Grosz draws primarily from Maurice Merleau-Ponty includes two major characteristics: one is the body as a subject committed to objects, and the other, the body's link to the representation of

spatiality. First of all, the body serves as a subject committed to objects. As for the body as the context of relations to objects, Merleau-Ponty indicates the body as a subject, a “being-to-the-world” (viii). The “being-to-the-world,” Grosz contends, is “the instrument by which all information and knowledge is received and meaning is generated. It is through the body that the world of objects appears to me; it is in virtue of having/being a body that there are objects for me” (Grosz 87). Which is to say, the body which exists here is “defined by its relations with objects and in turn defines these objects as such” (87). It is the body which places the person in the world and makes relations between the person (or the body itself) and other objects. The body in this regard is a subject since it is the one which dwells into the world. Meanwhile, this subject perceives and receives information of and from the world. The body lives and experiences the objects of the world, which stimulates the sensations and gives experiences to the body at the same time. The body, or Grosz terms as ‘the lived body,’ is a subject which already designates its existing and integrated relations with objects. Being a subject that is committed to the world, the lived body can be represented and expressed in specific ways in particular cultures (Grosz 18). Therefore, the body as subject already denotes certain agency and their bodily movements as practices.

The other trait is that the lived body is naturally connected to the representation of spatiality. By considering the body as subject committed to the objects of the world, we can see how the body inhabits space because the body’s movement is not limited to submitting passively to space and objects. The body actively assumes perceptual relations with them. The body for Merleau-Ponty is the very means of the access to the conception of space: “the ‘here’ applied to my body does not refer to a determinate position in relation to other positions or to external coordinates, but the laying down of the first coordinates, the anchoring of the active body in an object, the situation of the body in the face of its tasks” (102). A clear reading provided by Grosz is that “space is not understood as a series of relations

between different objectively located points, points of equal value . . . Rather, space is understood by us as a relation between these points and a central or organizing perspective which regulates perceptions so that they occupy the same perceptual field” (Grosz 90). Grosz’s reading makes it manifest that space does not function as an entity in which objects are placed in rational and abstract relationships. It is represented according to the way it is experienced by a combination of perceptions of the body.

Furthermore, the lived body, admittedly negotiated with spatial and cultural possibilities, is ontologically ‘sexed’ insofar as sexual differences are valued in those material relations that make the lived body. For Grosz, sexual differences are rather encompassing; they are “more like bodily styles, habits, practices whose logic entails one preference” (Grosz 191). The lived body is made possible to open itself up to the significance of the other sex. Under the Cartesian dualism of mind/body as well as male/female, woman’s body appeared absent. In the condition of objectifying woman’s body, it was homogenized into an abstract entity which was obscurely understood. Woman’s body was not the lived body in that sense because it was unknown and unrecognized. Grosz claims that the study of body must return to the infinite traits of the body and must resort to those differentiated bodies as “an open materiality, a set of (possibly infinite) tendencies and potentialities” (191). The concept of the lived body and its corporeality developed in Grosz’s perspective emphasizes “actual social relations” (the practices and connections embedded within such relations) of the space (Howson 122). In other words, different bodies will address particular dimensions that are directed to various models of the body in the form of sexuality, subjectivity, and corporeality since they are always ‘lived’ in their essence.

Following in this vein, the shopgirl’s body reveals actual social relations, relations with commodities and consumers, which are absorbed in the particular public space of the department store. These social relations are intricately

concerned with class terms—an upward mobility of working-class women as well as a feminine identification by leisured class women through commodity fetishism. Her displaying body is, moreover, inscribed with her sexual features especially in front of the consumer's gaze: its extreme feminine attractiveness is materialized as a commodity that dazes and confuses viewers' visions. In Millicent's case, her bodily experiences are stimulated by the display culture, constituting unique visions entangled with the visualized effect of display. Learning from the 'school' of department store, Millicent's acquaintance with commodities and crowds then equips her with specific visions. Such visions designate her perspectives through her commitments to the display culture, which produces mediation on those involved factors of subjects (consumers) and objects (commodities). The shopgirl's visions are already invested with the interactions between consumers and commodities. Her displaying body swinging between the role of subject and object, nevertheless, complicates her visions. Since the department store makes a difference to Millicent, her enthusiasm of work prompts her to a specific knowledge of seeing and being seen while she was practicing her job in the department store. Derived from such displaying experiences of commodities, two visions are to be identified through Millicent: vision of 'being seen' and vision of 'seeing.'

Millicent's profession of modeling mantles and jackets in the department store ostensibly justifies and condemns the shopgirl's passive roles as commodity-objects. Her displaying body seems the very means to accomplish the purpose of display: to appeal. The function of appealing should be carried out through her adorned femininity since there was no better way to draw consumers' attentions than by the emphasis of her appearance. However, if the shopgirl is simply dressed to be seen, she would fall into being an inert object of the viewer's gaze. Under that condition, the body will be nothing but a similar product generated by the Victorian discourses of 'respectable femininity' which stress the

gentile and virtuous features for upper-middle-class women. To acquire the appropriate behavior and knowledge for shop employment, shopgirls must be trained by virtue of “the necessity of politeness towards customers, and a constant self-command” (qtd. in Sanders 26).¹⁴ The training to gentility and self-command assumes that girls themselves might not inherently display the proper characteristics of middle-class femininity, and would need to be “thoroughly well instructed” in the behavior and appearance before their customers (qtd. in Sanders 26). The necessity of education in the manners of the shop and of maintaining gentility is thus central to how shopgirls ‘perform’ to be respectable so as to mediate consumers’ desires.

Millicent, in particular, knows how to take advantage of her beauty and how to appropriate such shift while being seen. Thus, her appealing femininity never functions as objectively as a respectable one. While Millicent’s awareness of ‘being seen’ keeps up with paces of fashion in London, her personality has expansively been embedded within commercial conventions corresponding to her unique femininity: experienced, aggressive, and independent. In other words, her appealing femininity involves the logic of visual attraction developed in her modeling. She has realized how the system of commodity creates the spectacle and is able to make herself a spotlighted spectacle among the crowd as well. The viewers’ gaze is drawn by her on purpose, and simultaneously she projects such gazes confidently with her well-attired appearance, instead of being just an object of consumers’ gaze.

Millicent’s appealing femininity has been vividly portrayed by James as an extremely gorgeous shopgirl from head to toe:

She was, to her blunt, expanded finger-tips, a daughter of London, of the

¹⁴ The shop education reveals its intention to remedy the complaint about women’s lack of business training through the creation of a school to educate female shop assistants in their trades (Sanders 26).

crowded streets and hustling traffic of the great city; she had drawn her health and strength from its dingy courts and foggy thoroughfares, and peopled its parks and squares and crescents with her ambitions; it had entered into her blood and her bone, the sound of her voice and the carriage of her head; she understood it by instinct and loved it with passion; she represented its immense vulgarities and curiosities, its brutality and its knowingness, its good-nature and its impudence, and might have figured, in an allegorical procession, as a kind of glorified townswoman, a nymph of the wilderness of Middlesex, a flower of the accumulated parishes, the genius of urban civilisation, the muse of cockneyism. (IV, 61-2)

Such appearance delineates not only Millicent's presentations of a sexually attractive woman, but also her urban traits of "strength, affectionateness, and warm sensuality" in the large and fashionable West End department store (Trilling 85). Moreover, this passage suggests an interrelation between London and Millicent in their shared flamboyance. London has been considered as a modern city which assumes a fashionable atmosphere by virtue of its growing commodity culture. The city of commodity is noted for a variety of goods that emphasize appealing appearances to attract more customers' attention. Things have to be made for and sold under the spotlight. In this sense, London streets and the London air are permeated with such a shining style. Millicent's costume, consciousness, and capability are not only "a product of London streets and the London air" as is Hyacinth, but also is more vividly, an incarnated figure of London itself (V, 79).

From the male perspective of Hyacinth, Millicent's remarkable image shows no traces of her past East-End origin: "she appeared to have no connection with the long-haired little girl who, in Lomax Place, years before, was always hugging a smutty doll and courting his society; she was like a stranger, a new acquaintance, and he observed her curiously, wondering by what transitions she had reached her

present pitch” (V, 83). Hyacinth’s new feeling of Millicent as a stranger may result from the contrast between past and present, the child Millicent and the brilliant Millicent before him. She seems to come from a different world as if Hyacinth had not known her since her childhood. Born from an East-End slum class, she is not ashamed of her family background and feels lucky to be a shopgirl: “the domestic circle had not even a shadow of sanctity for her” (IV, 67). Miss Pynsent, Hyacinth’s adopted stepmother, sees the same picture: “looking at her hat, a wonderful composition of flowers and ribbons; her eyes had travelled up and down Millicent’s whole person, but they rested in fascination on that grandest ornament” (IV, 57-8). Miss Pynsent had an unpleasant impression of Millicent as the little girl who had often played with Hyacinth, but is now astonished about how Millicent was transformed into such a fine-looking girl. Being an old-fashioned seamstress who still had some sense of drapery, Miss Pynsent concentrated on Millicent’s hat garnished with delicate ornaments and could not help judging and admitting that Millicent had changed a lot. Confident with her fine clothes and good looks, Millicent knows that she can always be the focus that has been admired and adored in general: “she was used to that sort of surprised admiration, being perfectly conscious that she was a magnificent young woman” (IV, 58). Looking back at Miss Pynsent, Millicent notices her almost-lost hair and coarse cap perhaps, small and weak: “wondering if that were a specimen of what she thought the fashion” (IV, 58). She concludes that Miss Pynsent “knew so little what was to be got out of London” and believes that “she herself was already perfectly acquainted with the resources of the metropolis” (IV, 59).

Millicent gets accustomed to dressing up to reveal her young and feminine charms, whether on duty or off work. While Hyacinth took Millicent to see a play in the theater, Mr. Vetch, his friend, asked if he wanted a box. Hyacinth claimed no, asking for “something more modest” (XI, 181) and continued to explain, “Because I haven’t got the clothes that people wear in that sort of place, if you must have

such a definite reason" (181). Speaking of Millicent, Hyacinth commends that, "Oh, I dare say; she seems to have everything" and "the clothes" because "she belongs to a big shop; she has to be fine" (XI, 181). For Millicent, going to a public place is nothing more than the most common and most pleasant since being public has much to do with the act of displaying herself in the shop. Being public means being seen, and being seen means an opportunity to make herself appealing. Even when she is off work and outside the shop, Millicent is fond of dressing herself magnificently in order to attend various occasions. It is her London way of life. While going out with Hyacinth, she always "presented a most splendid appearance" (XII, 187). Thus on Hyacinth's part, standing next to Millicent seems to gratify "a certain youthful, ingenuous pride of possession in every respect save a tendency, while ingress was denied them, to make her neighbors feel her elbows and to comment, loudly and sarcastically, on the situation" (XII, 187). Accompanying a girl with the most splendid appearance, Hyacinth felt embarrassed on the one hand and proud of being her companion on the other. In this sense, Millicent has employed her appealing femininity to appropriate the viewers' gaze and, to a certain extent, to transcend her original humble status in the visual hierarchy of urban culture.

Millicent's consciousness of being seen might be originally derived from the job practice in the department store, as she claims, "We have to be beautifully dressed" (IV, 67). 'Having to' could be a demand from work; nevertheless, her own manners and attitudes towards the vision of being seen also matters: "but I don't care, because I like to look nice" (IV, 67). Millicent's displaying body at first acts as the possessed object of the viewers' gaze. However, making good use of her displaying experiences to increase her appealing femininity, Millicent becomes the subject capable of maneuvering the customer's desire. Fascinated and attracted by the urban crowds, Millicent is adept at managing their gazes and then "blurs the gendered power structure of the city" with her vision of being seen (Parsons 50). In

her application of visual logic of commodity, Millicent's body cannot be regarded as a manipulated object by consumers or by employers, but a subject that takes up some agency to reverse its inferiority circumscribed by the conventional ideologies.

If the vision of being seen has already disclosed Millicent's body as an active subject in some degree, the vision of seeing will further manifest her subjectivity. As a shopgirl of such a great department store, Millicent has constant contacts with numerous consumers all day long. For her, the crowds of consumers are neither a faceless nor a generalized group of people. People in the crowds are diversified in characteristics and conditions of existence. Millicent's vision may not be as panoramic or penetrating as that of the male *flâneur*,¹⁵ but she bears witness to the mobile crowds by situating herself among them and directing interactively with them. That is to say, she has thrown herself into the crowd, with her position moving, unstable, and active—'inside' the crowd. This internal position helps her to have the most straightforward contact with the crowd, and surely, to see the people in the crowd. With numerous opportunities to constantly observe, Millicent can take detailed looks at people: what they look like, what they look for, how they live, and in particular, how much they will spend in the department store: "She had the pretension of knowing who every one was; not individually and by name, but as regards their exact social station, the quarter of London in which they lived, and the amount of money they were prepared to spend in the neighbourhood of Buckingham Palace" (XII, 189). Due to her proficient experience, Millicent concerns herself with the enormously fluid categories of passer-bys and cunningly interprets their behaviours. Though Hyacinth sometimes feels her interpretations "so very bold and irreverent," he has to admit that, "She had seen the whole town

¹⁵ The concrete representation of urban spectatorship can be best made through the figure of *flâneur*. Among these explorations of urban spectators, Benjamin's *flâneur*, with reference to Baudelaire's modern hero, is capable of experiencing the big city in his own way—a way close to commodity production. The *flâneur* derives his pleasure from seeing the crowd in the way of seeing commodities. An insight into the *flâneur* denotes that he defines himself by the specificity which he envisages commodity intoxication yet remains conscious of social reality (Benjamin 1973: 59-60).

pass through her establishment there” (XII, 190). For her, seeing the crowd refers not only to an experience in the crowd, but also an understanding of the crowd and of the relation between the crowd and the store. She can observe different people acting in different ways of seeing and buying. The crowd in the department store becomes an encyclopedic source to give various information far beyond a domestic space to which women are usually confined. Her place in the crowd and the department store makes her vision immediate and active in receiving such information. Thus, transforming the phantasmagoric department store into a knowledge-based space, Millicent has appropriated its spatiality to her advantage in her vision of seeing the crowds clustered in the store.

Millicent’s glance of Captain Sholto exemplifies such extreme ability. At the first sight of Captain Sholto, Millicent instantly recognizes his stylish garment and categorizes his countenance:

she was able to make out the details of his evening-dress, of which she appreciated the ‘form’; to observe the character of his large hands; and to note that he appeared to be perpetually smiling, that his eyes were extraordinarily light in colour, and that in spite of the dark, well-marked brows arching over them, his fine skin never had produced, and never would produce, a beard. (XII, 192-3)

Millicent’s glance is keen and of wide range because she was especially “particular about gentlemen’s society” (V, 83). In such a quick glance, Millicent has paid attention to this gentleman’s fine dress, which reveals his possible fortune and high status. In addition to his outer appearance, she is quick and eager to tell what kind of person he is: “on a nearer view, that he was a fine, distinguished, easy, genial gentleman, at least six feet high, in spite of a habit, or an affectation, of carrying himself in a casual, relaxed, familiar manner” (XII, 196).

Hyacinth’s vision can be demonstrated as an opposite example to Millicent’s.

Hyacinth's vision is permeated with burden and contemplation since he struggles between two inextricable worlds, the slums where he was born and the commercial communities to which he has adapted; he suffers from the opposition between the old and new arenas of London. His psychological conflicts take place when he sees that a promise of harmony is impossible. He is in the midst of passions and alienations of the changing urban space. For that reason, when Hyacinth starts to go out with Millicent from time to time, in his mind, unconsciously emerges Miss Pinnie's shadow: her old sewing tools and "smell of poverty and failure" (IV, 62). His preoccupation with the poor makes him guilty. He felt that the immensity of London and the teeming variety of life is rendered so clumsy and brutal, and has gathered together so many of the darkest sides of life. Hyacinth is a subordinate, subject to the uncanny and impenetrable logic of London commodity culture. He endeavors to single out his formerly innocent connection with the beloved streets and places, and what comes to him is, however, an unexpected sense of confusion and agitation.

Unlike Hyacinth's perspective, Millicent's observation of people in the crowd is not in the nature of a "high moral tone" but of "a free off-hand cynicism" (XII, 189). And there is a lot of truth in her observation, too, while Hyacinth is bound by respectable niceties, Millicent turns out to be the one not cheated by appearances. Millicent, for instance, "thought most ladies were hypocrites" (XII, 189), while Hyacinth shows his naivety by saying he is most shocked and finds this 'vulgar.' For Hyacinth, her observations are "of the most surprising kind" (XII, 189) and often "vulgar, clumsy and grotesquely ignorant" (X, 162). She may be vain: "Millicent, to hear her talk, only wanted to keep her skirts clear and marry some respectable tea-merchant" (X, 164), but she is still "bold, and free, and generous, and if she was coarse she was neither false nor cruel. She laughed with the laugh of the people, and if you hit her hard enough she would cry with its tears" (X, 163). Millicent's vision of seeing the crowd is revealing in her interaction with people:

She summed up the sociable, humorous, ignorant chatter of the masses, their capacity for offensive and defensive passion, their instinctive perception of their strength on the day they should really exercise it; and as much as any of this, their ideal of something smug and prosperous, where washed hands, and plates in rows on dressers, and stuffed birds under glass, and family photographs, would symbolize success. (X, 164)

Her vision is derived from her accumulated experiences and instant judgments on those whom she has seen. She may be vulgar, but she is remarkably clear-headed, aggressive, and confident, with a shrewd knowledge of the city and a “plucky” ability to survive within it (X, 164). There is a unique combination of strength and easiness in her participation in the crowd as well as in her personality: “She stood on her own feet, and she stood very firm” (IV, 67).

Millicent’s vision of seeing is derived from her mobile position among the crowd. Unlike Hyacinth, who rejects and is ignorant of commodity culture, and nor like Miss Pynsent, who is incapable and impotent to accept the new urban changes, Millicent takes advantages of her new opportunities to enter and enjoy the unrestricted, public life of the metropolis through her job in the new urban space of the department store. Though the job of shopgirl is seen to cause sexual and social risks in the midst of the gendering of desire, the shopgirl becomes familiar with what is new in the city much faster than do other people. More significantly, two visions of being seen and seeing make her a streetwise urbanite, whose very capability of displaying body in relation to the specific socioeconomic mode of consumption affirms her vigorous and competitive nature.

Conclusion

Proceeding from the shopgirl’s contested position with reference to the spatiality of department store, we can conclude that the shopgirl’s displaying body

gives vivid evidence of intricate workings of commodity culture. Learning from commodities and from crowds offers her abundant information on the everyday progress taking place in London. More than just an ornamental commodity, Millicent eagerly acquainted herself with those disquieting yet intoxicating images of commodities, and at the same time, with every individual among the crowd. The two axes of urban life, that of commodities and that of crowds, compose her particular visions. She takes advantage of her publicity and appropriates the gazes and desires of the consumers to her advantage. Instead of being simply read and judged, she develops her street wits to move above masculine reflections of female bodies as commodities. Millicent's displaying practices provides her with ample accesses to urban life, and makes her a true London girl swimming with the tides of commodity culture.

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