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Übermensch: A Feminist, Literary, & Artistic Rebuke to Modern Patriarchy in the Institution of Liberal Arts Education

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ÜBERMENSCH: A FEMINIST, LITERARY, AND ARTISTIC REBUKE TO MODERN
PATRIARCHY IN THE INSTITUTION OF LIBERAL ARTS EDUCATION

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
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Introduction

I graduated from high school a year early, partly because I felt like I was wasting time navigating—and mostly failing—the shallow, hierarchical systems of high school, and partly because I didn't have that many friends by my junior year. I talked to my teachers about the material instead of other students. They talked about pop music, and gossip, and parties that I never got invited to. Not that I would have gone anyway; I didn't drink. I was skinny without curves, talked a little too much, wore black too often, and couldn't care less about *acting* a certain way, as everyone else did. But that's not to say that I didn't care about being cool.

The University of San Francisco accepted my application in late February, two weeks after I turned seventeen, and I walked the stage a couple of months later. My loneliness didn't matter anymore. By then I was fantasizing about California. The opportunity to travel, the ability to leave: *I wanted that.*

Life got harder in college, but certain things also became clearer to me. First of all, I became aware of my identity as a woman, as a member of a minority, and as an inexperienced teenager. Secondly, I realized that being cool has less to do with actually being cool, and more to do with fitting in with what society prescribes as healthy and normal. The popular kids are all the same. They are attractive, well dressed, and somehow always know what to say. They are the ones who fit in; they are seemingly not confused about their image, their status in the group, the details of their very *personhood*. I struggled with my lack of experience—with drinking, with sex, with people—and how it made me reject my peers, how it made me lonely.

As age transforms guileless youth into a collection of up-and-coming adults, society asks that they internalize the many rules, assumptions, and hierarchies that a patriarchal American society teaches about how to live, relate to others, and succeed in a culture that functions on skewed

perceptions of equality and acceptance. College provides young adults the opportunity to journey the world alone, but, as Elizabeth Amato points out, the institution's liberal principles do not give "adequate support for the individual to stand up to the crowd" (Amato 132), and so individuals who do not fit in can't even have a voice. I am interested, specifically, in the culture's justification for pushing individuals to conform to social standards that do not have the individuals' interests in mind, but its own objective in producing a compliant, hegemonic majority.

My project examines the ways sexuality and status play a part in the development of the female individual, and how fiercely the culture combats traditionally unfeminine characteristics in the modern woman, including intelligence, confidence, and independence. Societal tactics of manipulation endorse unrealistic images of femininity that push girls to eat less, work out more, dress and make their faces up a certain way. They recreate the group with an identity whose voice is but an echo of the oppressor. As Hélène Cixous points out in *Laugh of the Medusa*, if you "censor the body, you censor breath and speech at the same time" (Cixous 350). This project gives special attention to the question of what it means to be a woman in a society that favors looks over intelligence, silence over independence, and forces sexuality on bodies that are not necessarily ready (or even old enough) to wield it.

During the early stages of my thesis project, I was excited by the opportunity to create a work based entirely on whatever I wanted. I thought about writing a memoir, but then I thought, that's way too much about myself. I then made an effort to write a collection of poems about my coming of age experience. I've had a unique journey, I thought, and it's worth showing. But then I realized that, through the particular choices I have made for myself, I really *have* had a unique journey. A big part of my experience has been shaped by the feminist literature I have acquainted myself with. It told me about structure, helped me understand how the system works, how to

observe, and how to walk on through it. I am empowered, and it's not only my strength from writing (and the writing and friendships of my like-minded peers), but the strength that comes from understanding, or at least attempting, a better world, a better community, at least. I thought long and hard about my long-term goals. I wanted this project to be practice for what the rest of my life would be. I am a poet and an essay-writer, an artist and an academic. I wanted this project to nod to both of these disciplines. I am a feminist, and I thought that the coming of age story for women in the United States was a fluid enough topic to work into both.

My checklist began: incorporate my favorite novel, *I Am Charlotte Simmons*, think up an argument about identity, sexuality, patriarchy and support it with works in women's, gender, and sexuality studies (the coming-of-age experience of the title character: *voilà!*), and, accentuate the material with a creative persona who wanted to tell the story behind the analysis. Having read Wolfe's book more than once, as well as other of his novels and essays, I felt confident in my ability to make a well-educated statement that would get bolder along the way. I chose genres I excel in and feel comfortable speaking in terms of—literary analysis, personal essay, and poetry—and by the grace of the *duende*, I found a way to establish a critique of western society, specifically, the nature of liberal arts institutions in the United States and its carefully structured policing of sexuality, gender roles, and social status. Now *that* was a topic I could bite into. After all, I deal with it on a daily basis.

Which brings me to my next point: *teeth*. A big reason I brought Tom Wolfe into the mix as a primary source was that he said what he wanted to say, and with such brazen force that at the end of a piece, you couldn't help but see it his way, even if you didn't agree. Wolfe, a smart-talking observer, a Southern gentleman turned New Yorker, has had a great impact on my essay writing in terms of voice, style, and content. He showed me how to investigate what I didn't know and

what I questioned, unabashedly, to find the truth out for myself. I chose to work with Tom Wolfe's *I Am Charlotte Simmons*, for both academic and selfish reasons. I knew that in using his work, I could attempt to be just as brave in my own writing, both analytically and creatively.

I first picked up Tom Wolfe's *I Am Charlotte Simmons* in the fall of my freshman year of college, prompted by my father's praise and recommendation. I meant to read it the summer after graduation, but I never got to it. Instead, I checked it out of the library of my new university around the second week of school, and spent the semester reading it at my leisure. In that semester, I had a surprising number of firsts, and some of these were experiences I had not intended to happen. That was the first life lesson that college taught me: *expect the unexpected*. The second lesson went along the lines of: *keep your friends close, and your enemies as fucking far away as possible*. Unless, of course, you meant to take a stab at being popular.

Wolfe's 2004 novel tells the story of a brilliant young girl—innocent, beautiful, and unsullied—who moves into a radically challenging, status-driven, hypersexual university setting. She has always been different, and knows this, but she cannot see why those differences—her intelligence, her abstinence, and her ideals—cripple her attempts to belong. She is smart and ambitious and proud, and yet boys and girls alike do not know what to do with her. Instead of trying to understand her, they ignore and degrade her. And although she represents and holds true many admirable traits for young women, her experience in the world tells her to change, to be like everyone else, because fitting in is the goal, (or, as I have come to realize) the immediate concern.

This story speaks to me because it tells me about myself. A “nice girl” (and by that I mean a young and totally inexperienced girl such as Charlotte), such as my former self, has little more to do than observe, to learn, and to perpetuate. Patriarchal views liken women to sexual objects whose main ambition relies on their ability to satisfy male desire. Women's fashion sexualizes immature

bodies, pop culture reinforces the norm that pretty girls play dumb and shallow guys play Adonis, and the social politics of flirting dictate an outdated, sexist discourse between men and women.

Resistance to these messages results in rejection and loneliness, an empty dorm room surrounded by the social and sexual bliss of the outside that pounds your doors and windows in, reminding you that *you are not good enough; you do not belong*. Like Charlotte, I had to open up to different ways of communicating, as well as new ways of making and maintaining relationships. It wasn't always comfortable, and it often did not turn out as planned, but it was the chaos, the fun, and the determination to thrive that allowed me to find the strength to make compromises with the demands of the campus culture.

My intention in incorporating a creative, autobiographical text originates from the simple fact that I love to write. I love the way creative writing can charge me with experiences that I have not had. I love the way it connects people, and poetry especially, the way it captures nameless feelings so precisely, so intimately. In my life, writing has been the one strength that I come to when I feel helpless and unsure of myself. I know what it feels like to be completely unsure of my decisions, working towards something only to find out the reward was a flop, and yet trying to remain optimistic, hoping that all this strange, new world will eventually start to make sense. I want my readers to acknowledge the gravity of the theories I articulate throughout the project, but I also want them to see it for themselves.

Wolfe's novel concludes at the end of Charlotte's freshman year of college, so we never get to see what happens to her. As a senior, I want to go back and retell that story with what I now know. I wanted to flesh out the things that Charlotte couldn't name for herself. My personal writing throughout the last four years has often captured the consequences of being an outspoken, sexual woman in a traditional college environment, but it has not been able to name the cause. Writing

from experience helps me say what I wish I could have said years ago, the things I wish Charlotte could have incorporated into her journey, too. I hope my work can aid or inspire other young women and girls to believe in themselves as they are, not as society wants them to be.

While researching relevant articles and critiques of the novel to use in this project, I came to find only a few scholarly works, the rest being book reviews. This kind of literary criticism greatly informed the way I saw the characters and the world they live in, because nothing the writers wanted to say was silenced by scholarly constructs that try to keep us thinking objectively. I was lucky to find two scholarly works with oppositional views on the topic. I was also lucky to find that I did not completely agree with either, which indicated to me that my project was speaking to a much larger conversation on the book.

Other writing that has greatly influenced the form of this project include the sarcastic brashness of David Sedaris, the employment of footnotes as a means of telling the story as in the work of David Foster Wallace, and the emotional and thoughtful honesty of contemporary spoken word poets such as Andrea Gibson and Warsan Shire. They each speak with a charming intensity and raw feeling that fuels both compassion and alarm in the reader. They make me want to get up and *do something about it*, and that is why I looked to them for help and inspiration.

I want to get my peers—mostly men and women who think we live in a post-feminist world—to care about these issues. They will never be resolved if feminists stand on their soap boxes while men gallivant around as enlightened, entitled kings and the rest of us remain uneducated on the subtle reaches of a patriarchal society. I think this conversation is simple enough to have with anyone who is willing to listen, so perhaps *moving* them into inquisitiveness might eventually lead to action.

Other influential writers include Audre Lorde, Gertrude Stein, Virginia Woolf, Sylvia Plath, and Seymour Krim, who have all taken on the political in their personal writing. When I began, I was unsure of how to write something beautiful while speaking to something ugly, and I was very cautious about coming off as a confessional or a slam poet, as these are not styles that I write in, nor do I find them particularly effective in getting their point across. I wanted to be visceral, but not melodramatic; angry, but not hysterical. I saw how Virginia Woolf and Sylvia Plath covered their politics with paradoxical or radical metaphors, as well as straightforward conviction in the change they wanted to see. I read Gertrude Stein and Audre Lorde in the hopes of learning the essence of experimentation and literary theory, but found uncomplicated and clever means of expressing discomfort and disdain for the structures we live in. In Seymour Krim, I learned that sometimes rock bottom is the best place to start in the creation of something better.

Exploring the “hybrid” element of this project has been a major concern throughout the formation of this piece. I was determined to have the two pieces in conversation with one another, because I know how effective it is to be rational and emotional at the same time. It brought the theories to life in a way that couldn’t happen before. I began thinking about David Foster Wallace’s “A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again” and the way he puts purpose and flavor into the footnotes, making them a pertinent part of telling the story, rather than a side note. His footnotes *are* the story, and I wondered how I could do that with essays and poems. I was, and am, very much interested in the attempt. So I’ve been playing.

In the course of completing this project, I have learned a lot about my capabilities as both a thinker and a writer. I have realized that I have a more well-rounded view of the world than I thought, as I read from almost any section of the bookstore, and that while I don’t know everything, I can and will find out what I need to know. I know I don’t shape up to Aristotle’s vision of virtue,

nor do I have the holistic understanding of the world that Nietzsche's *übermensch* does, but I am always thinking about these things and trying to get it. I am egotistical, selfish, and proud, and yet fluid and ever changing.

I want my creative writing to make people thoughtful and adventurous. I want my academic writing to open eyes, urge bigger conversations about womanhood and the human condition, and *matter*, because as Riot Grrrl tells us, "girls constitute a revolutionary soul force that can, and will change the world for real" (Hanna). More than making a name for myself, I want to touch the world with my work. I want to employ my experience, my intuition, and my cognition to guide people to a complex understanding of the world, so that we can change it.

I am a fair-skinned Mexican (half Mexican and white passing), sexually fluid (straight passing), able-bodied, college-educated woman, born and raised on the East Coast of the United States. I have intelligent, progressive parents (both writers, I might add) and a family of loud-mouth New Yorkers and Jersey folk that have always told me to speak my mind, no matter how irrational it sounds, no matter how many curse-words or fancy words (they have similar effects on people, don't you think?) you have to use in order to be heard. I have the privilege to pursue writing as a career, and to be expressive, to play with gender presentation, to love or have sex with who I want. I am lucky enough to have been born in New York City, where I am less likely to experience hate and violence toward my personal and political beliefs.

My particular oppression comes primarily from my place as a woman in a patriarchal structure, and partially from my class status. I struggle (I use this word here loosely) with being young, attractive, and fundamentally flirtatious, because it hinders my ability to be taken seriously, and it covers me in stereotypes of shallowness, ignorance, and passivity. I acknowledge that this construct has also helped me get hired, get better tips as a waitress, and gotten me breaks on things

I've muddled. However, this problem has concurrently provided many harmful and negative experiences, including sexual harassment from employers, being spoken for or spoken over by male co-workers, and being taken advantage of when under the influence of reality-altering substances, such as drugs or alcohol.

Because I am financially independent as a 21-year-old, I am not able to afford much. I cannot really turn down job opportunities, even if they put me in indirectly uncomfortable situations, such as with a boss who asks me out to lunch regularly. I remember once talking to someone in Union Square, in Manhattan, and the topic of money came up. I said I wished I had more money so I could buy a designer bag; he offered me \$1000 to sleep with him, then followed me around until I finally jumped in a cab. Apparently a bubbly personality never says "no," nor does a woman in need of quick cash. My experience with affluent men who are aware of my humble means has told me that, in their minds, I can be bought. Whether it's a date, gifts, or blatant requests for sex, affluent men feel entitled to claiming my body. Being sexual labels me as a slut, and therefore sexually available. Being confident and articulate translates into bossy, self-righteous white feminist. Being young makes me just another recent college grad with a degree in one hand and radical feminist literature in the other. After all, *it's just my rebellious phase*. I'll grow up sooner or later, but I won't ever grow out of being a woman.

And as I grow up, I can only imagine that I'll get louder and more resilient. Because that's what being an artist is about, and fixing obvious problems in this world is what I'm about. Because these problems *will not* go away by themselves. Montaigne, the Frenchman who coined the *essay* encourages us to be "wary of accepting common opinions," because they hinder our ability to think for ourselves, and to judge our reality and all its components "by the ways of reason, not by popular vote" (Montaigne 228), because it is popular vote (in the U.S. we began with representation by

wealthy, white men, and 200 years later not much has changed) that got us here in the first place. I've seen great art change people, and I've seen great minds shape others towards better understanding, through publishing work, giving lectures and interviews, protesting, and teaching. The point now is to hear the voices that have been silenced, or forgotten, or rewritten. The point now is to open eyes, open hearts, and open minds, and to touch as many people as possible.

First, I endeavor to get a good hold on the problem myself. I try to remember that I am a student at all times, that there is truth in everything, and that this world turns with ambition, not passivity. I observe the work of activists and writers and I try to pick out the strategies that have the most positive impact. This doesn't necessarily mean the most successful or most widely televised, but the ones whose outcomes are direct and simple, no strings attached, no hidden agenda, no take-backs. I've learned to be critical of everything, even the things that appear most humane or good intentioned, because it is the hidden messages and the hidden agendas that we stay ignorant of that strengthen our culture's active systems of oppression. I've also learned that in order to produce change, we must create a new language, a new way of building, communicating, and functioning, for as Audre Lorde paradoxically realizes, "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" (Lorde 110). But as the society stands, we have only the master's tools to work with. I intend to make something that throws the terms of those tools—sexism, racism, classism, homophobia, ableism—right back at those who directly benefit from them. Because oppression cannot last forever, and because the world is always changing and learning, we can reclaim the tools—language, stereotypes, power, shame—that have abused us. We can reimagine a house that has been destined to crumble from the start.

Welcome Weekend

I spent my entire Saturday moving my body and my belongings from one side of the country to the other. I spent the night in a foreign dorm hanging out with the rest of my freshman class, with the seventh floor girls of Gilson Hall. At some point I realized that I had not yet eaten since coming to my new home. I wanted to go out and find something, and my roommate, Berklee, was definitely up to the adventure. She and I walked to the grocery down the street, skimming for items that did not require a kitchen.

We bought Ben and Jerry's, a bag of tortilla chips, a can of refried beans, a cup of Lucky Charms cereal and a small bottle of two-percent milk, to share. We got back, and soon after noticed the smooth surface of our canned item. Are you *kidding* me?! I heard her say. She looked to me with concern. We did not have a can opener, so our hopes of simple nachos were put on hold. She knew I had not eaten since breakfast time, which was actually three hours *earlier* on the East Coast where I woke up. In place of nachos were salty chips, spoonfuls of sweet Chunky Monkey, and some marshmallow pots of gold. My first dinner away from home.

After brushing my teeth two sinks down from a girl I had literally never seen before, putting my bed together, hanging up all my delicates and framing a picture of my family for my desk, I sat awake, shifting in a wooden chair whose cushion was tired from what I presumed were late nights of study. I quietly organized my pencils, moved the picture frame back and forth, checked the weather here and back home. My roommate rested a few feet away. I felt the silence around her breathing. I felt silence flickering in yellow-white light bulbs in the unoccupied corridor outside. I was lonely for the first time since arriving, but I was also thinking about tomorrow.

They say the first night of any move feels the strangest, and it's the most confusing next morning when you finally wake up. Dreams feel the same almost anywhere, because they live in the body; they feel at home in that place no matter what. When I close my eyes tonight, if I ever get to it, I can feel something familiar. When I wake up I'll feel foreign again, but only for a moment while I'm coming back into my body. I've spent many nights this way. I like not knowing what will come in the future. I like new experiences. New friends. I like the chance to begin, rather than continue. Like waking up.

I woke up early and watched the sun rise. Its beauty helped me forget that my only friends were my roommate and a few girls I met at welcome weekend. And I guess this boy I met at an evening event last night. They're not really my friends per se, but they seem friendly enough.

They're nicer to me than my old friends. Everybody's nice here, partly because there's been no time and no motivation to act otherwise, and partly because we're all still working on our first impressions...

College: This World

Sleeps, with one eye open
Our token of being set free.

I'm finally one of those girls
Sent off to private school, a little bird

Flying out of my mother's arms, only
We are working for something

Tangible. Not just knowledge,
But a certain *degree* of knowledge.

Not just emancipation,
But a certain kind of *freedom*.

Little did we know that that was the most
Addicting, and unforgiving high.

One: Brave New World

During the four years of college education, young adults venture through an enclosed environment of academia that is as saturated in social hierarchies, hypersexual cultures, and questions of identity as in ideals of character, scholarship, and continuous intellectual growth. In Tom Wolfe's 2004 novel, *I Am Charlotte Simmons*, the university's inspiring curriculum strengthens the heroine's ability to observe the world around her; however, the life she encounters outside of class champions social success over academic and sexual prowess over restraint, thus intentionally situating the individual's identity squarely at odds with social compliance. The novel's university culture puts insurmountable pressure on its students, encouraging them to formulate distinct persuasive and intellectual opinions while at the same time complicating and to an extent compromising their ability to defend their autonomous thoughts and beliefs. In this way, individuals struggle to preserve their identities, specifically their attitudes towards peers, sexual expression, and notions of right and wrong, or to create another persona that yields to the current norms of social interaction and dominant notions that oppose abstinence of any kind.

The title character's abstinence from drinking, smoking, and having sex allows her to develop heightened self-respect as well as responsibility and caution about doing things that she finds reckless or disagreeable. Having virtually no experience in any kind of social life, she puts her hopes into figuring out how to get in with the popular kids, partly because they have the most visibility, but mostly because they seem to be the happiest and most successful. Her choices, informed by strict moral codes, cause her social status to suffer. She does not voluntarily adventure to party scenes where the "cool" kids hang out on weekends. She does not cooperate with or encourage boys' efforts to flirt with her (Wolfe 106), instead refusing the standards of social

discourse—cursing (Wolfe 19), sexiling¹ (Wolfe 177), drinking (Wolfe 216)—around her. The first chapters of the novel reveal a heroine who does not wish to conform to the influences around her, but to find her own place in a world filled with so many different kinds of people. She quickly learns that even the reputable Dupont University nurtures a social environment sedated with indulgence. Soon after arriving at Dupont, Charlotte sees that many facets of the university’s culture favor looks, sexual prowess, and conformity to its social norms over intelligence and independence. She does not budge in the face of standards for acceptable social interaction, but instead deems them as audacious and harmful standards that she could not care less about.

Being someone who lived outside of the dominant social culture in high school, she can identify the vices of the popular kids as well as the faults of the social spectrum in her world where peer pressure and unspoken guidelines of social conduct run rampant, flattering those who follow them and confusing those who do not. Charlotte’s speculations about why she does not fit in are constantly dismissed by Miss Pennington, her teacher and mentor, assuring her that she comes from better stock than that. Charlotte readily gave up the desire for popularity in high school because she was advised to hold strong against distractions that hinder her intellectual growth, and because she internalized the very grown-up notion that her peers’ objectives were near-sighted and aimless (Wolfe 30). The social skills she possesses from high school help her analyze people’s actions and motives, and with the added wisdom from Miss Pennington, Charlotte can successfully dislodge herself from the mundane struggles of her age group to see that worrying about the day-to-day things such as being the most popular girl in school, or having a boyfriend, or having sex, negates more virtuous intentions, such as pursuing knowledge.

¹ Slang for “exiling” your roommate so that you can have sex.

The only interaction we see between Charlotte and her peers comes in the second chapter when a few popular boys show up to her graduation party drunk and looking to patronize her. Confused and flustered, Charlotte cannot determine whether she is upset over their rudeness, or the fact that they had gone out of their way to see her only to be kicked out by her father. Charlotte's mother tries to console her, saying "You're my good girl, darling. You're my dear, sweet good girl,² and you know that" (28). Miss Pennington insists on her need to persevere, to "leave all that [gossip, boyfriends, drinking] behind" (30) and venture beyond struggles for popularity and social gratification. This exchange articulates the root of Miss Pennington's uneasiness towards the other high school kids, but it also foreshadows Charlotte's uncertainty, and by extension, her malleability later in the novel. Charlotte's community of women normalizes her instinct to operate against the dominant social culture, but also inadvertently tells her to repress her desires in order to be the "good girl" that they see her as and want her to be.

In Tom Wolfe's *I Am Charlotte Simmons*, the title character's detachment from social constructs and regulations, as well as her initial unwillingness to conform to the social world around her, allows her to function as an observer.³ Aware of the ritualistic lives of her peers, but uncertain of how to participate in the social setting around her, Charlotte goes about finding a

² Elizabeth Lunbeck's "Hysteria: The Revolt of the "Good Girl"" describes our culture's obsession with the "good girl," which stems from a long-standing system of beliefs that quantify a woman's value based on her purity, her passivity, and her virtue. She asserts that "good girls" assimilate into the greater culture by learning how to behave like one—quiet, sweet, non-confrontational, hegemonically feminine. In the 19th century, women's bodies began reacting violently, hysterically, to their cultural environments, and those who protested the restrictive "good girl" mentality, or whose bodies protested society's standards by way of subconsciously self-induced dis-ease, were labeled as "hysterical," and in some cases, "insane." The construct of the "good girl" has been one of the most successful tools in the subordination of female autonomy, female sexuality, and the female experience as a whole.

³ Like Nietzsche's ever-evolving *übermensch*, the "over-man's" (or here, "over-woman's") purpose lies in guiding his or her peers to enlightenment. The "over-man" has strength and knowledge that allow him to see things more clearly than his peers do. Nietzsche warns that the over-man must fight those who wish to silence and subordinate him, those who try to strike him out of fear or ignorance. He must also fight the human weakness that lives within him, the desire to socialize with others even when they do not understand him, or worse, when they try to make him give up his principles.

middle ground that will provide her companionship without compromising her beliefs. Charlotte resists societal tactics of manipulation, disengaging herself from participating in acceptable social interactions, namely, in the party scenes. This move, as well as her mantra, "*I am Charlotte Simmons*," fortify her ability to uphold her hometown's Blue Mountain principles, but this strength comes under the fire of ensuing loneliness, her desire for popularity, and pressure on Charlotte to change herself in order to make friends and alleviate that loneliness.

The Library

*“If you want to get laid, go to college.
If you want to get an education, go to the library.”*

—Frank Zappa

The library
At night,
Filled with every kind of creature.
The sorority girl dipped in letters and Starbucks,
The athlete shuffling paper planes and tap-dancing pencils,
The burn-out much in need of a haircut,
All studying
Or flirting
Already nostalgic
For those whimsical
College years.

But perhaps it's true
For what could be better
Than knowledge
Or sex?
Flowing tactfully
Through the stacks
Where no one suspects
It might be seen.

Waiting for peace
A moment to hear my thoughts
Scraping papers and giggles,
The passing of notes and phone numbers
Cascade around my ears.

Really? No place to escape?
Really? No place to rest?

At the end of the study sessions,
The late night papers,
The empty coffee cups,
People fade into their dorms
One by one
And two by two.

I fastidiously remain,
Like a book on an old shelf
That no one ventures to open.

Two: Shifting Communities, Shifting Perspectives

Charlotte, like most of her peers, solidifies her confidence and her sense of self by way of praise from those around her. In her hometown of Sparta, North Carolina, Charlotte's family and her mentor project images of independence, brilliance, and resilience onto Charlotte, who accepts and internalizes them. Miss Pennington warns Charlotte against the destructive intentions of envious peers, telling her that she must always protect herself from harm that disguises itself as something good. Dupont University's esteem excites her ambitions as well as her ego, but it places her in a foreign environment. Miss Pennington reinforces Charlotte's already swollen ego in telling her that she has something many people will be jealous of—intelligence, beauty, ambition—and tells Charlotte that the world is filled with tarantulas whose “sole satisfaction is bringing down people above them, seeing the mighty fall,” (Wolfe 30).

The problem here is that as much as Charlotte may believe this view in the comfort of Miss Pennington's office, experience may not offer her the evidence needed to believe it on her own. Miss Pennington's advice indicates that Charlotte should simply repress her desires to fit in, rather than exploring new territory for herself. She has in some ways ignored Charlotte's intimate desire for social status and acceptance, instead accentuating her depth in knowledge and in certain ways informing Charlotte's absence from her own coming-of-age experience. At first, Charlotte does not assimilate into any particular clique or friend group at Dupont, and this social separation causes Charlotte to question her lived experience and the ideals it has instilled in her.

Charlotte comes from a rural culture whose ideals are steeped in longstanding traditions, Christian convictions, and a repressed sexual culture, all of which support the pure, virtuous virgin until marriage over the reckless, sensual woman; and they leave no space in between. Her mother, a simple, polite and honest woman “who should have been beautiful” (Wolfe 24) refused to speak

to her daughter about sex and desire, insisting that one should only ponder these things after marriage. Miss Pennington, a “dignified woman of perfect manners” spoke to Charlotte of literature and ambition, but never about her personal quibbles associated with becoming a young adult, for Miss Pennington’s interests “were in things higher than the question of how far a girl should go or shouldn’t go” with a boy, should she ever get a chance. Her only close friend in school, Laurie, was just as “confused and innocent as she was” (Wolfe 25) on all of these matters, and so could not give any insight. Holistically, Charlotte has never had a female role model that could represent a strong woman adept in both academia and social prowess; and sex has been nothing but a mystery, an ambiguous question without answers. And so Charlotte comes to the university at a great disadvantage, for although she can confidently claim her intellect, she cannot truly claim a full understanding of her own adulthood. This uncertainty leaves her vulnerable to the pressures and challenges related to her views of academia, social life, and her moral character in general.

For Miss Pennington and Mrs. Simmons, encouragement towards knowledge was all the support she needed to succeed. The Charlotte Simmons heading off to school hopes to uncover a will to truth, an academic journey that would lead her out of the Blue Ridge Mountains to something significant. She hopes to leave the tobacco chewing, beer guzzling peers who rejected her for being different (Wolfe 18), and to find like-minded young adults who care about growing their minds and reaching their full potential. What Charlotte’s mentors fail to point out to her is the complicated relationship between being an intellectual and being part of the social world. This background has given Charlotte a great platform to accelerate her learning, being that her only focus has always been on her studies and her future; however, it has placed her apart from her peers in ways that have denied her opportunities to gain experience. Without lived experience and

friends to share it with, Charlotte goes through high school without learning to speak of her bodily desires, only her dreams and her “various citations for excellence” (Wolfe 14). Charlotte’s mentors do not explain how to differentiate between conformity and compromise; all she knows to do is resist.

In the first year of college, students learn how to succeed in their social environment via social osmosis, or they resist, learning to exist outside of the dominant social hierarchy. Conformity disguises itself as a means of gaining access to popularity and companionship, which the university social climate (especially the night life) weighs as the two most important things to attain, more so than grades or accolades. What young adults looking for care-free fun find is a social setting that normalizes a sexist script of flirtatious discourse between boys and girls, and perpetuates a singular narrative of success, whether it be academic (and lonely) or social (and somewhat reckless). The popular culture Charlotte wishes to penetrate promotes alcohol and drug use, and sexual relationships that do not need love or companionship in order to materialize, only youthful lust and alcoholic sedatives. Charlotte quickly observes that her moral standards do not fit in with these rituals. At first she tries to live a life detached from these pressures, as she has always done, but she no longer has a community that approves of this choice, only a community of peers who are comfortable with and enjoy the dominant culture.

With the change of environment and the loss of supportive friends and family, Charlotte must learn to navigate the depths of her difficult surroundings. To begin, Charlotte lives in a coed residence hall. Tom Wolfe points out in an interview with Carol Iannone that this environment situates “boys and girls in the season of the rising sap with juicy shanks akimbo in the same buildings, along the same hallways in most cases, in the same beds, as it turned out, buck naked” (Iannone). In getting to know the social climate, she asserts that having friends of high status is

more important than having good grades, and so her virtues begin to align themselves with those of her peers. The problem here is that Charlotte forgets to determine whether her friends and boyfriends want what is best for her, for in fact, some only care about taking advantage. Because she never had to participate in social interactions outside of her comfort zone (in high school she could go home after class and stay separate from the social environment), she has no idea of how she should participate. Charlotte finds herself in a muffled chaos of social interactions, overt sex, and new relationships that do not reveal their intentions easily, and for the most part, she journeys friendless and alone.

Call me a Bitch, Call me a Rebel, But Please Don't Call me Pretty Girl

"Because we are angry at a society that tells us Girl = dumb, Girl = bad, Girl = weak."

Kathleen Hanna, *Riot Grrrl Manifesto*

Night falls, and I get a call from the man, asking me if I'd like to see a movie, or if I need an escort walking home. I mumble and redress; I have a bed and Netflix of my own. But he chatters and persuades along, assuming there's nothing I'd rather do than be in his arms the whole night long. I hang up, having failed his test; he is yet another stanza of a simple yet popular song.

Why is it that when I get up to leave, another man acts as if I need help getting home? I have two legs and two fists to protect me on a two-minute walk alone. It's not as if I'm helpless. It's not as if I'm a child to hold. I'm a *woman*, and a soldier, autonomous and bold.

When night falls and I emerge at parties, I am no longer a person, but a body. I'm a small waist with big eyes and a certain *look* that attracts lust and hopes for paradise, whether I'm asking for attention or not. And my words, they sprawl in the neon lights, because they never land on hungry ears. Boys look at my lips as I speak them, imagining the fantasies they'd really like to hear.

And why must I be a fantasy? A Barbie to undress and revere? But never a woman and never that smart, just an object, a conquest, a *rear*. Don't call me beautiful because I look like you want me to. And don't call me a lady, because it's not an image you think is true. You want a fox that laughs at everything you say, a pretty face to smooch on, and open legs where you lie. Stop asking me about my hometown and major; it's not like you really care. Unless I intend to make you feel good, you won't listen, you'll move on, and disappear.

The culture equates me with beauty, not intelligence, not strength, not good. It's not the way I see me, and it's certainly not the way you should. The culture upholds your patriarchal power, and as you tower over me, I feel its weight. You forget that I'm more than my beauty.

You once told me to make you dinner while you lay in bed with a drink. I told you I disliked your gender roles, and you smiled, and laughed, and winked. You forgot that I am a person, not your servant and not your obedient wife. Such bother this discourse fuels in me; how can I live this inhibiting life? I don't want to come off as angry, but your "chivalry" is uneasy and uncouth. I thought you might revise your language, but now I see it is solid in your mouth.

Truly, I want to tell every boy to fuck off, but that translates into playing “hard to get.” Though my comfort, my standards, my refusal fall on ignorant ears, it’s your sexist conditioning I really reject: a lifetime of myths and sexist riffs that make this an exchange I regret.

He Says

I've been fighting a lunatic
A ludicrous maker of little white lies
An avid fantasizer of little legs,
And Bambi eyes, with shallow heads

*

He says he can give me everything
I say, make me a better woman
Because I'm sickened by my diet
Because I'm silenced by ignorant ears
Because I'm different in a world that's all the same
And I'm tired

*

He says *put your hand in your mouth*
Cut your meal in half
You're a skank and a glutton
You need to be this way

*

And I run away to the recreation center
To the third-floor bathroom

*

He says *put your hand in your mouth*
This is as good as it gets

*

This is as good as it gets

Three: Gimme, Gimme

The sexual culture in the novel is characterized by alcohol-induced, frequent sexual activity, and supplemented by men's expectations of sexual pleasure. A woman exists as a potential sexual partner whose worth is determined not by her intelligence or her personality, but by her level of attractiveness and aptitude to be social. Such an environment encourages young girls to decorate themselves for a male audience, as well as to cooperate in boys' seemingly endless pursuit of the erotic.⁴ The patriarchal structure teaches women to accept male expression of sexism and assertions of dominance. In Allan Johnson's *The Gender Knot*, the author describes how men demand the main focus of any and all situations, and women cater to this sentiment by dressing up to men's standards of beauty, waiting to be noticed and complimented by the male gaze, and ultimately gauging their self-worth on how many boys go out of their way to talk to them (Johnson 12). Charlotte acknowledges this but does not name it, "Looks, boys, popularity—and what good were looks if you had failed so miserably at the other two?" (Wolfe 29).

The male gaze, introduced in feminist film theory by Laura Mulvey, associates female performance and desire with the expectations of a male audience. For example, a woman will flutter her eyelashes, giggle and form postures that show off her best attributes so as to catch a man's attention or to show that she has interest in him. When this idea of being seen by and pleasing a man in person translates into everyday life—such as in outward appearance and gender performance—it transforms into a cohesive female experience tied under the male gaze. Most

⁴ Audre Lorde connects the uses of the erotic to a source of power that has been withheld, intentionally, from the female race, and secured by the threat of appearing sinful, uncouth, or *worse: slutty*. However, in college we learn that boys *like* girls to be slutty, and excessively sexy, but only if it is produced by and useful to the *boy's* desire, rather than the girl's own passions, sexy or otherwise. The erotic—like the female body—has been misinformed and misguided, led astray by a cultural moment that does not want it to be reclaimed. Society's reaction to the erotic treads a thin and confusing line between intrigue and moral discretion. Like the first time you hear someone say "penis" or "vagina" in public, and you perk up your ears, but let out a little gasp of mock disgust, because it's polite to be modest.

troubling is that men do not need to be present in order to enforce this code; the gaze works as a policing device that teaches its participants to constantly perform their female roles whether they are being watched or not.

Charlotte attracts the curious gaze of boys around her; however, she has no way of acting upon (let alone noticing) this gaze without making herself seem awkward or incompetent. Furthermore, her disinclination to change herself in order to fit in, as well as her lack of social and sexual experience, inhibit her ability to find a means of interacting with boys in a way that is comfortable and respectful of her particular desire which craves emotional—rather than physical—intimacy. Charlotte notices that boys in college are interested in one type of girl, and that is the one who knows the “right” way to flirt. Charlotte distinguishes the characteristics needed for a girl to thrive in this setting: she must be “attractive, experienced, and deft enough to achieve success at Dupont, which, as far as she could tell, was measured in boys” (Wolfe 196). These girls who sing and bellow in their “mock distress over the manly antics of boys” represent a sort of triumph that Charlotte cannot attain, for although she is naturally and simply beautiful, she does not have the makeup, the clothes, the attitude, and above all, the experience.

Charlotte’s first interaction with college boys sharply displays her inability to play the game. Early in the novel, the ever-so-attractive, popular and super cool star of the basketball team, JoJo Johansen, chases her down after sharing (as Charlotte perceives it) a dissatisfyingly easy class. He extends shallow compliments, revealing obvious intentions in his aside to the reader, where he admires her appearance (namely her butt and legs) and her unique beauty, a purity that “went with a *look* she had” that “gives you even *more* of the old tingle” (Wolfe 105, italics in

original). JoJo expects Charlotte to cave under the power of his gaze⁵ with excitement and gratitude. JoJo's experience with women, influenced in great part by his good looks and highly valued athlete status, has been that a simple hello could get a beautiful girl in bed with him at any moment. Charlotte defies his expectations as she walks by him "obviously not even knowing what an eminence she had just been so close to" (Wolfe 105), disregards his powerful athlete status, and utterly ignores his charm. Instead she asks him about his immature performance in the class they had just had together. She baffles him, saying, "You knew the answer to that question Mr. Lewin asked, didn't you? But then you decided to say something foolish. Why?" (Wolfe 106). Charlotte chooses to interrogate the student/athlete dynamic and by extension the unspoken rules dictating that athletes cannot be talented simultaneously in sports and academia. After listening to a haphazard and obviously goofy response, she concludes that he would rather play the fool than be "uncool" in front of his teammates, thus, he is not worth her time.

A few weeks later, Charlotte reluctantly enters the party scene, pressured by Bettina and Mimi, the only friends she has made thus far. Charlotte is taken aback, and hesitant to deny her friends' request to go out, but she is baffled at how she had "somehow committed herself to a dreadful test that wasn't worth taking in the first place" (Wolfe 199). She fumbles around her dorm room looking for something to wear, made anxious by the spontaneous plans. She lands on a simple print dress that "wasn't the right thing, but at least it showed off her legs—although not enough" (Wolfe 199). She arrives underdressed and unprepared for the events to come, indicating her detachment from the mainstream life of social interaction. Unlike her female peers who dress in

⁵ In the first and second chapters of Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents*, the author describes women's search for a mate. Women often look for seemingly super-human specimens—such as athletes, or musicians, or celebrities—who appear most likely to (a) create a home and protect it and his mate, and (b) produce strong, attractive children. According to Freud, women seek the *alpha male*, the one with the most power (in strength and resources) and the most acceptable form (and amount) of masculinity. This directly contrasts with men's desire for a mate, that searches more for beauty and the ability to bear children.

dark, sexy clothing with eyes that shimmer like jewels, Charlotte wears a somewhat childish floral print graduation dress with safety pins securing the raised hem and no makeup. Upon entering the house, Charlotte felt as if she were on “an alien planet to which she hadn’t been invited to,” (202) feeling as inappropriately fashioned as anyone could be.

Peter Berkowitz’s review of the novel indicates that Charlotte begins to perceive the conquests of the athletes and frat boys, and of the glamorous girls on campus, as the standard for other students, including herself (Berkowitz). Social cues in the party scene prove that wearing makeup, painting her lips, acting amused and bemused with boys, and wearing any of several articles of flashy, revealing clothing that accent the body result in attention from boys (Wolfe 203), whose attention and level of interest measure a girl’s success at Dupont (Wolfe 196). Her inability to achieve the aesthetic standard set forth by the girls at the party demoralizes her, and it is this reaction that indirectly coerces her to strive for those standards, for fear of standing out, and not in a good way. Charlotte acknowledges, “she believed she was pretty, but looked too adolescent, too innocent, vulnerable, virginal—*virginal*—the humiliating term itself flashed through her head” (Wolfe 15). Unfortunately, Charlotte fails to notice any other standard of beauty, and so strives for the one that is (in her eyes) most effective, and yet the one with the highest cost to her.

In her quest to fit into the party scene, Charlotte drinks for the first time (216) and follows Hoyt, an upperclassman in St. Ray, and possibly the most popular boy at Dupont, around the fraternity house as he offers her drinks as well as passage into exclusive parts of the house. His attractiveness, his suave demeanor, and his overall air of authority (207) convince Charlotte that spending time with him, and more important, being seen with him, will aid her struggle for acceptance; for “this Hoyt represented social triumph” (211). Bettina and Mimi catch a glimpse of Charlotte with Hoyt and they both stare “with amazement and envy” (210), Bettina glowing with

wonder and Mimi hanging her head in discontent. Charlotte sees Hoyt first as just another boy at the party, but soon his authoritative demeanor as well as his status in the fraternity urge Charlotte to pursue him as a romantic partner throughout the first half of the novel. He is not only a way of gaining status for Charlotte by association, but he is also a sort of protector (218), a strong man to guide and shelter her from the party's chaos.

The text represents the male gaze and the female gaze in opposition to one another throughout the scene: whereas the male gaze objectifies and sexualizes the female body, the female gaze marvels at and objectifies attractiveness, strength, and most obviously, authority. Similarly, both gazes relish in being acknowledged and envied. Girls enjoy being the object of another girl's jealousy, while boys give whoops and high fives to their friends who are succeeding. Charlotte's attraction to Hoyt is motivated more by the envy it arouses in her friends than by her desire for him alone. Inversely, Hoyt wants reassurance from his buddies that the girl he picked is up to the standards of the social environment. One of his brothers "who had a drunken, openmouthed grin on his face, gave Charlotte a frank appraisal" (Wolfe 208) which not only justifies Hoyt's tactics of manipulation, but also encourages him to push further. These exchanges assert the age-old appropriation of femininity as beauty and masculinity as power.

Romance Part 1—I Didn't Used to Play Hard to Get

Romance, I love you,
But no longer
Will I hold your hand;
No longer will I chase
A harried dream
Without end.

Experience has told me
I strive too hard
For the things I want—
Too much energy into new love
Too much *fire*, yet not enough.

It has told me
I don't hold anything back
And perhaps I can't;
Whereas passion was the ideal
Mystique is the new black,
The styled attack on my rapturous heart.

My insides are smart
Hiding safely beneath my skin,
But as I walk and fall
My spirit sprawls deeper underground.

Above me stars gleam
Behind an opaque glass ceiling
That I take as blankness.
Among the wreckage, I stand still
Without emotion, without will.

Though I paint a portrait of myself,
Cover my flesh with perfection you can see,
I never really feel that perfect
And I never really look like "me."

Romance never lets me forget
That I'm not the girl I used to know
And though I hate it today
I know I will still love it tomorrow.

Baptism by Jack Daniels

Polished tonics sent my mind to sleep,
Left my body to mumble senselessly
As if at the start of a nonexistent dream.

The night spread out on a white sheet,
Chattering on the screen of a
Hurriedly pacing heartbeat—
Mindless hands and feet, thrashing
At the thought of staying still.

I keep uncovering bruises on my arms,
Coping with shaky hands,
And spouts of alarm
Toying with an insatiable desire
To scream...until I can hear myself—

Until I finally come around—
And see all that I was
Before the lights behind my eyes
Went out.

My thoughts thrown askew,
Who really knew
The person I was yesterday?
My tangled hair, my smile, my booze
I'm well aware I care too much for you.

A crooked boot leans into the floor
Wallowing steadily
Through moments of uncertainty.
When it falls
Heavy, and wrinkled,

I feel its weight, its shame
Sprawling out of the shadows
And up my legs, back into a tunnel
That hollows the tracks on my veins.

I realize it's a truth that only
The blackened night can mutter
A bodiless, unremembered scheme
With the pieces never coming together
As close as they may seem.

I Woke Up With My Monkey

Pink patchwork and groovy hearts
The tie-die sparks a hallowed memory.
Where am I?
I do not guess
Nor do I want to know.
The degree of pounding grows
And buries my head in misery.

Unstained energy,
Bad and questionably good
Sprawl within my stomach
Spinning in a colorful lump of anxiety
Until it rises
And I lose myself completely.

Eyes under shade,
Body under skin,
Head under the horizon.
I can only see
The needs directly in front of me.

I fumble along the floor
My room empty, my eyes
Finally clear. The friends who
Loved me yesterday, forgot me
And left me here.

No comfort, no peace,
Only a plethora of wrong.
My day belongs
To the flavored kiss
Shots of remiss and the shallow glee
Of last night's shady company.

Four: Learning How to Walk

The party culture tricks Charlotte into thinking that conforming to standards of social interaction and careless ways of having a good time will lead to acceptance and happiness, when really it seeks to normalize reckless behavior that blindly supports the system over the individual. Charlotte attempts to balance the “embarrassment of a little girl who had no experience in encounters like this” (Wolfe 207) with her own desire to fit in, and fight “the urge to run [which] clashed with her desire not to look foolish” (Wolfe 177). She succumbs to peer pressure in ways that she does not readily acknowledge; she drinks because she couldn’t bear the disapproving gaze of her peers (Wolfe 216) or imminent rejection (Wolfe 206), and although it appears to be a nice gesture from Hoyt, he only offers her alcohol so it will hinder her ability to make smart decisions and more obviously, to say no to his advances. She thinks Hoyt simply wishes to show her a good time and protect her from the chaos of the crowd; however, his tactics work toward getting him what he wants.

Charlotte’s narrative throughout the party maintains many of her opinions of the actions that are taking place all around her, even though she has already succumbed to parts of the practice. Hoyt asks her to dance, but she doesn’t realize that this particular ritual⁶ involves a sea of couples locked together in a wistful yet aggressive simulation of intercourse (Wolfe 209). This scene baffles and revolts Charlotte, and she retracts her offer to participate. Hoyt responds with a bit of surprise and a bit of anger and disappointment, and Charlotte “resents his attitude” (210) that seethes of entitlement. Hoyt’s intentions are quite clear to the reader who observes him pulling

⁶ S.E. Asch’s study investigates the relationship between group pressure and personal opinion. It shows the range of social influences that condition one’s behavior, especially when one holds the minority’s opinion. As would be expected, the opinion of the majority, and moreover the force of social policing and the fear of not fitting in, have the power to sway the individual’s opinion, or in this case, her behavior, to match everyone else’s.

Charlotte this way and that, his hand always around her waist, and his attention either focused on her or utterly distracted. And yet, his attention merely pressures her into uncomfortable situations, whether it be the bar, the dance floor, or ultimately, upstairs in the private rooms.

Charlotte battles to remain autonomous, for although she acknowledges that portraying a beautiful, sexy, popular girl and associating herself with Hoyt elevates her status, she does not wish to be an object for his or any other boy's pleasure. She tries several times to disengage herself from his grip, for "she wanted to show everybody that she didn't belong to him" (Wolfe 216). Most important, she asserts that he cannot do as he pleases, at least not without her consent. Throughout the scene, Hoyt speaks to other boys and in doing so totally ignores Charlotte. Hélène Cixous, French feminist and theorist, writes, "it is indeed that same self-admiring, self-stimulating, self-congratulatory phallogentrism" that encourages a man to do as he pleases, even in the event of opposition (Cixous 350). The last time he does this, he overtly implies that he and Charlotte have a shared interest in intercourse, stating to his fraternity brother that they are not through with the room. This claim causes Charlotte to burst out in an unflatteringly ferocious way. She stands up and yells in his face, telling him he's wrong to assume anything about her character. They won't ever be through with the private room "because *we* won't ever begin!" (221, italics in original). She storms out of the house, tears running down her face, but at least with her injured pride intact.

The social structure of Dupont student life ignores the personal needs of the students and cues them to follow the dominant trends of the culture as a whole. Elizabeth Amato's "Science and the (Lockean) Pursuit of Happiness in Tom Wolfe's *I Am Charlotte Simmons*," claims that this structure, "exerts incredible social pressure on the individual to follow its lead, and makes the individual more dependent on the crowd for her ideas and modes of behavior" (Amato 133). Charlotte initially rejects the actions of her peers, but learns that in order to have friends, she must

change to fit in. Once she dips her toes into university nightlife, flirtatious advances, and more fashionable presentation, she begins to watch her status move into a more favorable light, and she pursues it like an addict.

Charlotte changes herself to appear more approachable, taking social cues from undisciplined college students rather than from the high virtues of the classroom. How unsettling that the structure that aims to provide the means of gaining intelligence as “free” (*liber-*) people, also denies the individual’s autonomy, instead coercing him or her into submission! In Charlotte’s first interaction with JoJo, the basketball star, she articulates the purpose of a liberal arts education as learning the art of persuasion (Wolfe 182), and by extension, gaining freedom and political (i.e. social) access. While Charlotte recognizes the importance of an education varied in literature and rhetoric, she, like her peers, fails to internalize the intellectual freedom that this information holds because it does not directly lead one to social acceptance or accessibility. Wolfe’s novel uncovers the paradoxes of an institution that prides itself on its principles of liberal education and enlightenment, but whose environment concurrently teaches its students to follow strict social guidelines rather than molding themselves into unique individuals.

Romance Part 2—The Spider

Down the hall,
And at the end of the railing
It stood
Eight long legs,
Hairy and black,
Attaching themselves
To the back of the door.

My two eyes
Conjure a brew of fear.
Does this spider here
Glance at me as well?

His eight eyes take me in
And choose which girl to see.
Divided, and static
With uncertainty
Each eye provides
A different script
For me to follow.

I bite hard and swallow
A little piece
Of a temporary me.
It rattles under
Translucent skin.

Works for now, but then tomorrow
I know I'll soon forget
Perhaps, then, what you see
Is not always what you get.

Tall boy, tell me your passions
And I'll reciprocate with mine,
They are vague enough to make you stare
And share a drink and a line.

I wonder if you never doubt
That when you shout to me
I might not want to stay.

How soon we fall in love
With imaginary persons
Whose names we can never recall.
I fall into a slot, as that hot girl

You met last week.

Dear spider,
Why so sincere?
You sit as I contemplate
Where I am going
And who I shall be.
You're really not that scary
Though eight eyes
Are a lot to please.

Five: It's Not Popularity, But Status

The next time we see JoJo, he ponders his space in the social culture and decides to enroll in a 300-level philosophy class, “The Age of Socrates,” in order to prove to everyone that he is more than just a “jock.” JoJo learns that Aristotle’s rhetoric asserts that achieving the good life requires education and age. By education, Aristotle means to be well-read in human experience—literature, history, philosophy, politics—so that one can decipher which ways of living are most beneficial. By age, he means to have cultivated a long series of experiences that help inform and even develop that knowledge. Following this school of thought, “the good” requires success in academics as well as in social environments. In order to uphold Aristotle’s vision of “the good,” JoJo must educate himself, and Charlotte must experience the world. However, JoJo’s established status as an attractive athlete serves him well in an environment that rewards lived experience over theoretical inquiry, thus negating his efforts toward learning. Meanwhile, Charlotte’s lack of social competence dramatically diminishes her status and by extension, her ability to be happy, thus overshadowing her love for knowledge.

In having one of the characters take a philosophy class, Wolfe interjects lessons of moral character, balance between extremes, and virtue. Charlotte plays a pivotal role in JoJo’s transformation, being the one who first got him thinking about what it means to be a student-athlete. JoJo chooses to educate himself with philosophical thought, and although it takes him almost the entire semester to understand the material (let alone implement it in his personal life), he makes conscious efforts to abstain from reckless, misogynist behavior, carelessness in school, and the narcissism that prompted many of his former actions. In motivating JoJo to pursue enlightenment, Charlotte *does* act as Nietzsche’s *überman*, helping others to become better people. Throughout the novel, JoJo slowly improves his overall character, and unknowingly dismantles

the image of his masculinity, realizing that it is not power and physical strength that make a man, but character and the way he treats others.

The novel asserts that Charlotte has what it takes to transcend her peers at the start of the novel, but as the story unfolds she loses sight of who she was at the beginning. She fails to see how her differences in appearance, moral character, and outlook positively set her apart from the status quo as someone who has the wisdom and the discipline to succeed. She takes time from other obligations (namely her schoolwork) and directs it towards doing what she thinks will improve her life outside of class. Instead of trying to balance schoolwork and gaining experience, Charlotte sees her intelligence as a setback in her pursuit of popularity, and so she neglects it. As Charlotte spends more time at Dupont, her aims shift from academia to gaining higher social status.

According to Elizabeth Amato in “Science and the (Lockean) Pursuit of Happiness in Tom Wolfe’s *I Am Charlotte Simmons*,” Wolfe sees Americans as “status-seeking beings⁷ [who] pursue status often as the way of pursuing happiness” (Amato 132). At Dupont, Charlotte has no one to praise her intelligence, only peers who reject and scrutinize her desperate—and at times humorous—attempts to fit in. She no longer holds the status of a brilliant young student with the world at her feet; she becomes a failure in the pursuit of popularity, companionship and most of all, status. For Charlotte, acceptance in the dominant social group would provide her with the social status she so desperately covets.

This shift in Charlotte’s character articulates that without looking inwardly for strength and reassurance, one can never possess their positive attributes, only present an image of someone who does. Charlotte’s teachers failed to recognize that with heightened intelligence and moral austerity

⁷ See also, “Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast,” a wonderful essay where Wolfe analyzes the fall of the realist novel, the hypocrisy and contempt of the intellectual aristocracy, or aspiring American *intelligentsia*, and the ways in which American culture tells two-sided truths, one for those with status and one for those without.

often come rejection and loneliness which leave her wanting and vulnerable to peer pressure (Amato 134). They, like the environment at Dupont, teach Charlotte to find guidance from popular opinion rather than from her own thoughts and insights.⁸ The university culture—and in many ways, American society as a whole—equates relationship and status to happiness. Having only a few unfulfilling relationships and virtually no status, this new Charlotte will do almost anything to change that to be happy.

Elizabeth Amato concludes that JoJo grasps the point of a liberal arts education more so than Charlotte, because he employs it as a means of bettering himself and freeing himself from the limits of his “jock” status, whereas Charlotte uses it as a means for gaining power. Amato asserts that “JoJo takes charge of himself, leads others to change, and restores order” (Amato 138). Charlotte’s dismissal of him inspires enlightenment and self-discovery, teaching him that there is more to life than sports and sex and projecting a certain image of powerful masculinity. Because she reacts to JoJo’s advances with disappointment over his performance in the classroom instead of admiration over his awe-inspiring performance on the basketball court, she dismantles and subverts his gaze. It is his jokingly foolish performance that Charlotte takes into account when he asks her out, and it is this performance that causes him to fail. JoJo is taken aback by her response, and shortly after he begins to question his place in the social sphere as a “dumb jock.”

JoJo’s metamorphosis is motivated more so by his trying to prove himself to Charlotte, and his desire to conquer her in the sense of being successful in his pursuit, than by his desire to become educated as Amato speculates. Every time he sees her, he asks to take her out, using his newfound knowledge as a grounds for both elevation from his “jock” status and as a means of making

⁸ Read more about the “tyranny of the majority” in Alexis de Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America*. By this principle, people determine their feelings over a particular person or subject, not independently, but greatly biased by the general consensus, by popular opinion.

conversation. Initially, JoJo does not internalize the class material, nor does he directly urge others to follow his example. Furthermore, he does not live up to the ideal of the enlightened American übermensch that Wolfe's novel creates because, as Hawkins sees it, "he does not possess the natural wherewithal to lead, as is evidenced by the inflated C+ he earns in "The Age of Socrates" (Hawkins 412).⁹

The idea of using knowledge in order to dominate others is a notion introduced to Charlotte by her friend Adam, a brooding intellectual who desires recognition as well as triumph over his peers who dismiss him on the grounds of his lack of poise, attractiveness and status. Because he does not have wealth or a title, he attempts to make himself look good through academics, prompting Charlotte to do the same. He sees academia as a level playing ground where hard work can achieve almost anything, even domination over peers who do not work nearly as hard as he. Thus, Charlotte's intellectual pride and desire for dominance is yet another characteristic she acquires through social osmosis, not a condition she exhibits herself.

⁹ In Valerie Solanas' outrageous *SCUM Manifesto*, the author attempts to reimagine the male-dominated psychological language of works such as *Civilization and Its Discontents* by Sigmund Freud. She addresses the subconscious need of men to become more complete beings by coming into union with the "more perfect female." This point of view indicates that JoJo's transformation into a more perfect being can only happen with Charlotte's support, which contradicts the more traditional view that women need support from men in order to succeed.

An Unforeseen Product of Learning to Count

Organic black bean burger, 120 calories, 40 from fat. Whole wheat bun, only on the bottom, 75 calories, 10 from fat. Tabasco, a couple calories, round up to 5. And a piece of lettuce, let's say 1 calorie, 0 from fat. That's 195, 200. Divided by four pieces. That's 50 calories each. *Okay, 50 seems fair.* This is one of my favorite things to eat. There's something about good protein that makes me feel so, well, so good! Mmm...Mmmm! And it's so good for you too! Mmm. *But then it's gone.* It's always gone so fast, no matter how slowly I eat it. I write it down. *50 calories...50 calories.* I...think I'll eat half of it, just this time, if that's all right. *Half? That's 100 calories. Do you really think you can afford that? That's like, 8 minutes on the stationary bike. Don't throw it away.* Oh fuck...It's alright. It's just this once.

...

Yeah, just once, and then it's twice, and then it's every day, and then you're a fat piece of shit who can't look in the mirror, too anchored by the weight to move. Oh my god...Oh my god, what have I done? What have I...? Why! Why! Why! Why! Why! Why did I do that! Why the *fuck* did I do that?! *You fucking animal! Couldn't help yourself, just had to stuff your fucking face, you little shit!* You little shit! I can't believe you just did that.

...

I never used to like cigarettes. In fact, I used to hate the smell, but my babysitter was a big fan of it, so I smelled it every night when I fell asleep. It's soothing now. *Quick breaths in, slow, and steady exhale. Calm down.*

The buzz feels nice. I imagine the toxins leaving my body with the smoke. The toxic fat, that sticks to me, and is almost impossible to get rid of. But I will.

I will.

I get into bed and it's all I can think about. *50 calories you didn't need. Now you have to waste more of your free time working it off. Wasn't there anything else? Sugar-free jello only has 5 calories, what about that? Or a rice cake. That's 20.* I can't sleep. *Is your tummy rounder than usual? Looks like it, little shit.* I can't let it go. I raise the sheets and am suddenly quite cold. I hate being cold. I look through the little box I keep in my desk, second drawer, left. Sewing supplies. A tape measure. Nail polish. *Here they are, the pink pills.* I love the color pink. Pink like under my skin. *Take one tonight and feel better in the morning. They'll kick in overnight and make everything go away.* I get under the covers and rest my eyes, and then I am finally asleep.

...

Ah...Owww...fuck, oh fuck, oh fuck, oh fuck. Ah...

I have to get up, it hurts so bad, like a stomach ache gone very wrong...*just go to the bathroom.* I feel like I might throw up, so I run to the toilet. But nothing is coming out of my mouth. *Stand up. Throw your panties down.* I sit on the seat, and it hurts. It really hurts! It feels like my insides are running through me, running away from me. They pour into the toilet. *See? There you go. That's the shit you put into your body.* I sit there just a bit longer. *Get up, wipe yourself, head to the sink.* My eyes are red, and my face is pink, and I'm thirsty. *You look like shit.* I drink water from a cupped hand, and I look up again. *Turn to the side, let's see that tummy,* and I lift my shirt. *Thank god! Last night's mistake is undone.* It's morning, thank god, and I can start anew. *You're welcome. Don't do it again.* I won't do it again. I go back to bed, flutters of pain still erupting in my bowels, but it'll go away when I sleep.

...

Morning. *First position pliés, check the mirror, make sure your thighs don't touch.* They're not. Thank god. *At least a little bit of tummy fat can be gone in a day or two.* I dance for an hour and a half every day, with an hour workout every other day. It was a little hard at first but I'm getting the hang of it. It's all about rhythm, getting the right rhythm. And sticking to it, day after day. *It's liberating, really. Such focus.* Such focus....that few others have.

Six: A New Community of Women

When Charlotte returns to her residence hall from an emotional night out, she encounters a group of girls lying around the hallway, and inquiring about the reasons for her distressed appearance; however, Charlotte's weariness with other women and their intentions silences her. Charlotte's perceptions of other women relate directly to her experiences in high school where any expression of care or kindness was really an attack on her being, an attack meant to humiliate her and pleasure those who inflicted it on her (Wolfe 19). Each time she gives a vague answer to the girls in the hallway it only works to sharpen their appetite for more details, "she couldn't tell which ones, because she avoided looking at any of them—these...these...these *witches*, assembled on the floor solely to torment her!" (Wolfe 223, italics in original). She fears their sympathy because ultimately, she knows that once she closes her door, those same caring girls will be snickering behind her back, for "the wreck of Charlotte Simmons was *their* Friday night" (Wolfe 223). Charlotte's inability to form bonds with other women furthers her alienation and arouses intense suspicions that keep her feeling defensive.

Charlotte's defensiveness towards other women stems from a deeply rooted distrust amongst women that our society normalizes through fashion and numerous forms of media which center on how to be the perfect woman and how reaching that ideal elevates you above other women. This distrust inhibits their ability to stand together. In Hélène Cixous' *Laugh of the Medusa*, the author claims that society has "insidiously, violently, led [women] to hate women, to be their own enemies, to mobilize their immense strength against themselves, to be the executants of their virile needs" (Cixous 349). In this way, society situates women against each other in order to compete for male attention; it has created "a narcissism which loves itself only to be loved for what women haven't got! They have constructed the infamous logic of antilove" (Cixous 349).

And so the culture promotes the idea that women love femininity and the image of the perfect woman, but that they love it as a man does, for its beauty and tenderness, for its ability to intrigue men.

Tensions between women are elevated by the ideals of a society that identifies beauty with a standard that (almost definitely) requires malnutrition and self-loathing. Eating disorders, major cosmetic surgeries, and widespread insecurity have surged in recent decades like a venomous plant, causing girls to question and challenge their bodies.¹⁰ Charlotte's roommate, Beverly, represents the hegemonically beautiful (and feminine) woman, and she appears to be much happier than Charlotte who instead exhibits confidence, intelligence and strength. Whereas Beverly is the "hot" girl with lots of friends, Charlotte is the "brainy" girl with very few. Although Charlotte's beauty is unquestionable, it is also plain, and Beverly never fails to point it out as rudely and unapologetically as possible. Thus, the characteristics that prove valuable to a woman are her looks and how well they conform to the mainstream image of beauty. They give her popularity and value, as well as the platform from which to mock others.

¹⁰ Abra Fortune Chernik's "The Body Politic" describes a personal journey through eating disorder and the ways in which the images in American culture prompted her crazed eating habits, as well as her need to capture the ideal *look*, the ideal *body*, and the ideal *mind* for the upkeep of that image. The main focus shifts from bettering the individual to bettering one's image, because the social network prizes beauty in women over intelligence or power.

Romance Part Three—The Hookup

He said “hello” last night
Forgetting his flight from my room
Last weekend, when pressed against
The walls, the door, the sheets,
I collected his presence,
Then stared at his feet
As he crossed the grass below
Through the daybreak
Towards home.

I shudder, and croon
Residual lust lingering
At the base of my collar bone
I didn’t expect to see him
Quite so soon.

I hear his mouth open
And relapse. I recall him saying

“Hey”
As in “hello,”

“My name is Lucas”
As in, “what’s yours?”

“Won’t you dance with me?”
As in, “touch me the way
I want to touch you.”

He had invited himself in
And kissed me so feverishly
I couldn’t breathe.

It was 6:25
When I reached
For his toes
And he was gone.

He said “hello” last night, but
Not quite so intimate.
He’s done looking to me for company.

Seven: Putting the Pieces Back Together

Hoyt ends up taking Charlotte to his fraternity formal, getting her drunk, and seducing her. After he sleeps with her, he openly humiliates her while she's in the bathroom cleaning off remnants of her first sexual experience. After that, he never speaks to her again, and Charlotte descends into a bottomless depression. Her friend, Adam, a geeky senior who befriends her early in the novel, takes care of her and tries to bring her back to life. He is smart and ambitious, and has many valuable ideals that could have made him a good partner for Charlotte. Unfortunately, his hopes of getting a girlfriend and losing his virginity to her taints his seemingly well-intentioned actions with the same vices of his peers. He does not covet Charlotte for reasons specific to her, but for her beauty and her ability to elevate his status with a relationship and an active sex life.

Charlotte's newfound awareness compromises her relationship with two boys who pursue Charlotte in the novel, for Hoyt takes advantage of Charlotte's inexperience, and Adam takes advantage of the depressed state that ensues after her breakup with Hoyt. Once Charlotte realizes that blindly following the crowd leads to negative outcomes, she can once again direct her focus towards improving herself. Her ideal of the good resonates with personal reflection and just enough suspicion about the unknown to help her question things before diving in head-first. More important, Wolfe's return to Greek thinkers and their concept of happiness complicates the way the characters in the novel see happiness. While Americans seek status, the Greeks aim for knowledge and service to others. Whereas Americans desire material things, the Greeks admire virtue. This dichotomy allows Charlotte to question why she and her peers care so much about status and appearance, things that serve them externally, rather than internally.¹¹ In this way,

¹¹ Wolfe introduces Aristotle's concept of virtue in order to create tension with the short-sighted, materialistic goals of the main character and her peers. While JoJo fights for status among the black

Charlotte's emotional breakdown allows her to reassess her role in the larger scheme, to pull away from the culture that hurts her, and reenter her space as a good student.

In Ty Hawkins' "Tom Wolfe's American *Übermensch*," the author argues that Charlotte is the one character in the novel capable of overcoming the pressures of the humid social climate. According to him, she is the "post-millennial Zarathustra, destined to descend from her home in the mountains to lead others as far as they are capable of traveling in the development of a will to truth" (Hawkins 412). While Charlotte inspires JoJo to pursue deeper understanding of his world, she does not access the strength needed to achieve such a prophetic claim in full. She instead focuses on relationship, ignoring her initial desire for intellectual growth in a community of young scholars. In this way, Wolfe uses Charlotte's story to critique the system that has at once elevated and destroyed those most fitting to progress towards true enlightenment.

Wolfe opens his novel with a two-page preface detailing an experiment done by Dr. Starling, in which he removes the part of the brain that controls emotional responses in animals. The group of cats in the experiment went into a state of intense sexual arousal that was "manic in the extreme" (Wolfe 1). Next, Dr. Starling placed the more sexual cats in an environment with 'normal' cats. He quickly found that he could not distinguish between normal and abnormal cats; they had all become hot with desire. Starling's conclusion was that "a strong social or 'cultural' atmosphere, even as abnormal as this one, could in time overwhelm the genetically determined responses of perfectly normal, healthy animals" (Wolfe 4). Charlotte later learns from the prestigious Dr. Starling, that the great minds of science "laugh at the notion of free will," and at

basketball players of the team's starting five, Charlotte aims for popularity and acceptance. Aristotle reveals that honor and virtue are the only truly good things to reach for. And that's just it, none of these characters are looking to be good; they are looking out for their own self interests. Aristotle's influence allows JoJo to grow, to be a better man, and it allows the reader to challenge the prevailing structure along with him.

the belief that “each of us has a capital-letter I, as in ‘I believe,’ a ‘self,’ inside our head that makes ‘you,’ makes ‘me,’ distinct from every other member of the species *Homo sapiens*” (Wolfe 306). And so her professor teaches her that she has little (if any) choice in the matter of free will and independence, for ultimately, every decision she makes is inherently determined by someone else’s opinion, if not popular opinion alone.

Through Dr. Sterling, Wolfe suggests that the strength needed to overcome social conditioning stands no chance against the power of the larger system, and thus, the tendency towards socialization overpowers the individual. According to a review of the book in the *Journal of American Physicians and Surgeons*, “Dupont’s milieu, with coed dorms (and coed bathrooms), expectations of promiscuous and consequence-free experimentation, and omnipresent lasciviousness in dress and behavior resembles such an experimental setup. There is no escape” (Orient 127). And so, Charlotte’s fate is predicted before we even meet her, being that she, a simple, innocent girl is placed smack dab in the middle of a residence hall that doesn’t even provide privacy in her own bathroom, let alone in her bedroom and the hallways.

For many readers, Charlotte represents the strong-willed, intelligent and confident woman that the reader hopes will fight the battle against socialization, but the consequences of upholding that image are far too great even for her. The social structure she encounters shuts her out because “she not only gets perfect grades but *cares* about it, because she won’t drink or smoke pot or go along for drag races at night on Route 21, because she won’t say *fucking* this and *fucking* that, because she won’t *give it up...*” (Wolfe 19, italics in original).¹² Her intelligence, confidence, and

¹² See Jessica Valenti’s *Full Frontal Feminism* for chapters on other myths surrounding sexuality, as well as misconceptions about the female coming of age experience in America. This book is an easy step into the world of feminism, and the ways in which it has the power to ground and elevate women who believe the idea that no matter what, if you are a woman, there is something wrong with you, either your looks or your opinions, your shyness or your confidence.

stubbornness strengthen her ability to deny efforts to harm or manipulate her, for “one of the things that made Charlotte Simmons Charlotte Simmons was the fact that she had never let herself be bent by peer pressure” (Wolfe 199). And yet, it is her brain that makes her geeky rather than sexy, her pride that makes others want to break her, and her stubbornness that rejects socially acceptable behaviors; thus she stands apart and alone, and thus she becomes malleable.

She confuses her innocence and strong will with childishness, and as an obstacle to connecting with her peers, and so she begins to participate on their terms in hopes of transcending the line drawn between them. What she once thought “stupid, aimless, self-destructive” (Wolfe 19) becomes a rite of passage into the life of a young adult, and so she thinks her morals need to be revised. Hélène Cixous pleads with young women like Charlotte, asking, “Where is the ebullient, infinite woman who, immersed as she was in her naïveté, kept in the dark about herself, led into self-disdain by the great arm of parental-conjugal phallocentrism, hasn’t been ashamed of her strength?” (Cixous 348). Charlotte’s socialization leads her to believe that her strengths and ideals are contaminated with naïveté, and so she must change them. This condition stems from a culture that sexualizes boys and (especially) girls in its media, including films, music, and fashion. Both Nietzsche and Cixous emphasize that to be that ebullient, infinite individual, she must reject everything around her, which is an ominous task to ask of someone so young and so unknowing, especially in an environment that is pre-determined to overpower the individual.

On Breaking into Houses, Stealing, and Other Illicit Activities

High school didn't provide me with much experience in the ways of doing stupid things. I embraced academics, writing, and the performing arts as intimately as I embraced sobriety and abstinence. My friends and I went to ballet class outside of school, and we went to the mall and the movie theater and places like that, but we never went to parties. Unless you count birthday parties with chips, soda and our parents' best fixings. The first real party I went to was a few weeks after I went away to college. I had no idea what kinds of things would be there, and I did not know that I would try any of them, sometimes by accident, sometimes tactfully planned.

My first taste of liquor was Jack Daniels Honey, and I remember scrunching my nose, shaking my head, and sticking my tongue out like a little girl who had just unknowingly gulped a dose of medicine. I didn't like it, and I missed the point. A little while later I felt euphoric and giggly, like everyone else. I thought to myself, *Wow, so this is what I've been missing.* I liked being around people. I liked that everyone was happy and willing to be so friendly. I could have a little drink to fulfill the ritual.

In the first month of my freshman year, I was offered what looked like a hand-rolled cigarette, and since everyone around me put it to their lips, I thought I'd do it so I wouldn't stand out. I mean, it was only a cigarette, right? I took a breath of it, and coughed instantly. In fact, I couldn't stop coughing. I took a drink of water and relaxed my throat. I was leaning against the refrigerator next to the kitchen sink when I suddenly felt *extremely* serene. A friend I made at my first college party came by and asked why I was smiling, and I just smiled some more. She said something with a twinge of humor, and I just about lost it. She laughed with me, but smelled something unusual on my breath. "Have you been smoking *pot?*" she asked. "No way! It was a hand rolled *cigarette.*" She smiled and shrugged her shoulders; she was incredulous. Later I came to realize, I was totally *baked.*

In November of my sophomore year, I tried my first real cigarette. It was a Camel 9 Menthol, and I had it in the basement at a house party. The package was black with pretty teal borders and hot pink writing around the label. It was a *girly* cigarette. I remember that it tasted absolutely awful, and it lingered in my mouth and on my fingers for the rest of the night. But for some reason, I tried another one the next weekend, and after that I bought a pack of my own. It was the first real thing I had used my ID for. I would smoke cigarettes on and off until graduation,

but do not fret, I eventually upgraded to American Spirits with their full tobacco taste and their organic label, and never went back.

I have both observed and played a part in all the chaos of the college social life. I went as far as I was comfortable with at the time, unless ignorance took me a little further. I figure that sometimes I wanted to do what everyone else was doing, and sometimes I was curious for myself. At the end of the night, I just wanted an experience that I could relate to others. We want to be accepted, and we often go out of our way to make it happen. When we want to be “cool” like the rest of our party people, we share a drink, we try something new, and we dare others to do the things we are too scared to do ourselves. *Go dance with him. Tell her you think she’s cute. Take a shot of this vodka. Ask for his number.*

It’s a rigorous escapade.

And it’s just the beginning. Wanting to fit in mixes with our human desire to avoid (at times, distract) loneliness. Most of us are at the height of our teenage years—eighteen and invincible, as the story goes—and we want excitement, love and community. We want the high of being young to last forever. In my experience as a teenager in college, it was not the *invincible* feeling that prompted me to do irrational, and unusual things, as much as my readiness to grow up. I was an innocent 17-year old at the onset of my freshman year, on my own for the first time, and I had never had contact with the indulgences of the adult world. I thought, *I guess now is the time to try it all out.* I was done feeling like a child.

Drinking was more than enough for me at the start. It was new and uncertain, and I was still trying to gauge my limits. I could barely deal with the side effects of drinking too much, let alone my enigmatic visions of drug use. After a while I became disenchanted by drinking, having knowledge of too many friends in the hospital with alcohol poisoning, seeing too many broken phones and bruised lips, and encountering moments of sexual intimacy that should not have happened. My distance from alcohol gave me perspective, but did not withstand my desire to have fun in an environment where alcohol could be found almost everywhere, especially at night on the weekends. I was drinking less, and ready to move into new territory, but what?

By the end of my sophomore year, I had moved to pranks. Not terribly taxing on the body—that is, unless you had to run or climb through windows—but not terribly responsible either. I was growing up, learning about the world and how to navigate it, but I was still trying to make memories. For better or worse, I was in the mood to be juvenile, perhaps for the first time. It was

tantalizing fun until someone went too far (like when a particular porch got covered in gooey garbage), or when one of our friends tripped in the grass on the way out (ouch! not to mention, totally caught). The best pranks were the ones where there was an ongoing battle between groups of friends. Temporary graffiti, toilet paper in the trees, petty theft, all turned into a means of *one-up-ing* the others. It wasn't about having the best idea as much as getting the last laugh. After dating (and being dumped by) a bunch of hypersexual frat boys, I had the initiative to steal a shirt from every Fraternity on campus. They waved their sexual pursuits in the air like medals, so I decided to do the same with their letters. I got through half of them before I became uninterested. I've seen freshmen stealing paddles, and seniors stealing plaques and awards. When the prank was found out, everyone bit their tongues, knowing full well who did it, and trying not to chuckle.

The point was to have a few drinks at someone's house or in a dorm room and think up the next big scheme. After a while, illegal things emerged as logical ideas, and every once in a while we decided that maybe this one time, it was just crazy enough to work. This got especially confusing when romance got involved, especially with a boy who lives in a fraternity house. Those houses are most likely locked from the inside at all times, or have fancy locks that only the members know the trick to. What's worse is that boys tend to play video games and listen to music at high volume, and Fraternity houses are *not* small, so little white knuckles tapping at the door are quite easy to ignore. When knocking doesn't work, I walk around to the back of the house, to the entrance where people usually enter for parties. Boys do not always lock this door, so if you are adventurous enough to enter the house through the basement, proceed. When neither of these options prove successful, the craft factor kicks in.

By my senior year I had a lengthy fling with a boy in a fraternity, who lived in the house known for lacrosse players, sexy burnouts, and a whole lot of *not giving a fuck*, since they never show up to anything, and they were proud of it. Their house has a digital lock on their front door, one that can only be penetrated by punching in the correct four-digit number. I have attempted to sneak the magic numbers into my brain via observation, but those boys have big hands and big bodies, and so far, I only know that the first number used to be 7, and is now either 3 or 6. When no one's home or he doesn't hear the phone, I walk to the side door that enters the kitchen. I push it as hard as I can until it opens. It's not connected to the house, so I have to make sure I don't knock it down, so that when I push it back in place it looks like nothing happened. My best friend dates a boy who used to live in the Fraternity known for its grunge-hipster vibe, with a bunch of

boys that collect records, glide on skateboards, have various reptiles for pets, and love to smoke cigarettes. She used to sleep over every night with him, cooing in his arms as the rest of the house roared with tom foolery. The doors were all locked from the inside, and if no one answered her knocks or her phone calls, she had to sneak in through the window on the back side of the house.

My best friend and I bonded over long nights of sipping rum and Coke and smoking pot, which, as writers, fueled our creativity (so we claim; whether or not this is valid, only hindsight shall reveal). We only recently tried the drug thing, an evening acid trip into outer space. I was working through depression, and she was working through anxiety over the future; we decided to work towards gaining perspective together. We had had our share of adventurous nights where someone offered us a white line and a rolled up dollar bill, a foreign looking tablet, a seemingly innocent peanut butter sandwich, but did not feel ready to try it until now. It proved much more exciting than any prank we had ever pulled, and a much better means of healing than bottling it in until it went away.

I'm not much into recreational drug use, but I do realize that it is out there. There will always be girls who snort coke before going to a seminar, and boys who smoke joints before class. I leave the judgment up to personal preference. I think they are just trying to feel something, or nothing...I know for myself, I like to drink and smoke and sniff when I'm in the mood to fly.

Eight: Letting the Wolfe Out of the Bag

Critics of the *I Am Charlotte Simmons* have alluded to a sort of shallowness in the substance, wondering why Wolfe would turn from topics of business and big-city politics to a university environment whose most sizable endeavor is to attain popularity and have sex. Michiko Kakutani's book review in *The New York Times* quibbles with the fact that Wolfe's novel:

...does not tackle big-city racial politics, big-business financial shenanigans or big-time criminal justice as he did in his first two novels [...] instead Mr. Wolfe takes on the momentous subject of college life [...serving up] the revelation—yikes!—that students crave sex and beer, love to party, wear casual clothes and use four-letter words (E33).

What Kakutani fails to identify is the overwhelming effort of an overarching system to dictate to its participants, as well as its lack of effort to reach ideals—scholarship, courage, individuality—that the American disposition is built on. Wolfe's novel is not necessarily concerned with the plight of 18-year-old students embarking on a difficult excursion into college life, as much as with the system that not only instills a superficial desire for status, but also strives to remake the individual into a materialistic person of limited intrigue.

Friendlier reviews¹³ speculate that such misgivings come from a more deeply rooted disdain and mistrust for a novel that not only uncovers the hypocrisy of a highly decorated, highly esteemed institution, but does so in that delightfully sarcastic, emphatic way that only Wolfe's school of blunt, emphatic New Journalism can do. Barbara Scrupski's review "Why the Critics Hate Charlotte Simmons," describes their discomfort with the material, writing:

¹³ Both MaryAnne Glendon and Mark Bowden speak about the importance of college kids understanding their cultural moment, as well as the many factors—alcohol, social status, moral values, etc.—that might change the way they see themselves and others. While Glendon seems to see Charlotte through the lens of patriarchal standards, Bowden speaks to Wolfe's heroine as a spectacular woman who might have succeeded, had circumstance and environment treated her better.

It must surely be painful to see Tom Wolfe point out to them so vividly the faults of their dream: these are no children of nature running free, but foul-mouthed, spoiled teenagers, drinking themselves sick, engaging in games of psychological cruelty [...] and engaging in random, meaningless sex (90).

Beyond the novel's criticism of the institution is the unveiling of the actions of big-business' children. Beverly's father is a prominent businessman working in Massachusetts, and Hoyt's father hails from New York's very own Wall Street; both characters are selfish and indulgent, craving long nights of drinking that end in a sultry one-night-stand. Much of Dupont's student body embodies a similar demographic of spoiled rich kids who have fallen quite far from the grandeur of their parentage. The worst of their parents' fears is the vulgarity, cruelty and unabashed eroticism of their children.

Wolfe is intrigued by the shifting of moral standards influenced by the sexual revolution of the 1960's, in which young adults could engage in sexual experimentation and freedom without the consequence of procreation, and also by the advent of feminism. Promptly, "moral standards were coming out of the universities instead of the churches" (Iannone), and as far as Wolfe's feminism's effect in the college setting is concerned:

It says a woman should be just as free as a man when it comes to the role of sexual aggressor. She can hit on the *guy*, if she feels like it. And if a female student wants to do the old in-and-out with one of her professors or anybody else, that's her business. Think about it for a second. That's a huge change in morals, and it was incubated in the universities (Iannone).

True, women have surpassed the provincial courtship that regulates all initiation and flirtation in relationship as being male-to-female, but I argue that this construct benefits men more than

women. According to this claim, men can be passive in courtship if he so chooses, and a male professor can enjoy a youthful fling without consequences. However, a woman's ability to have sex with whomever she pleases does not yet have the ability to evade scrutiny. Still, many social spheres, especially that at the college level, hold women up to the virgin/whore dichotomy that cripples their status either way. One can be like Charlotte, a boring, up-tight little girl who just needs "the dust knocked off of her" (Wolfe 528); or one can be sexually active with one, or (God forbid!) more than one, partner and be called a whore.

But Wolfe is less concerned with the plight of modern feminism or the American 18-year-old girl and more with dynamics of power as they intersect the authorities of "economics, social status, and aesthetics" (Hawkins 398), for power relates to visibility. Wolfe "wanted to find out the status considerations that created all this, as I say, hot stuff" (Iannone). Charlotte's superstar intelligence grants her high status in high school, and she assumes she deserves similar standing in college. Charlotte's tragic mistake is that she begins to lose faith in academia's ability to grant her that status. She identifies status with fitting in, ignoring the importance of wealth and namesake in her pursuit of visibility. Her Spartan roots dictate simple means that do not measure up to the expensive and ostentatious means of the prep school kids around her. Whereas her roommate, Beverly, has copious amounts of clothes, electronics and other indulgences, Charlotte has only a suitcase full of outfits, three pairs of shoes, and \$500 to last her the entire semester, \$80 of which she throws away on a single luxury, a pair of Diesel jeans. She can, however, claim sex, as private as it is, because it too, holds status: "Lights on or lights off? Naked or partly clothed? Covers or no covers? Kinky or missionary?" (Iannone). Thinking this to be her only currency, she grapples with her moral code: does she keep to her roots and abstain, or does she forfeit those roots for the sake of visibility?

Much of Wolfe's work details the life of the American man who must learn to navigate treacherous circumstances, whether it be quibbles with money or status,¹⁴ the desire for true freedom,¹⁵ or the courage to withstand manipulation.¹⁶ His previous works have determined that the characteristics needed to persevere, the "right stuff," becomes "nothing less than manhood itself [...] manly courage" (Wolfe 21). But does it follow that *I Am Charlotte Simmons*, portrays the "right stuff" necessary for the successful visibility and tenacity of womanhood? The novel depicts the female identity, her image, her femininity, and even her health to be under insurmountable pressure to conform to images of tan, lanky, flirtatious size 0's with voluminous, shiny hair, enticing lips, eyes decorated like jewels and a willingness to say "yes" to boys and men who desire her. Charlotte's roommate, Beverly, arrives at Dupont with the looks, the friends, and the status to succeed; but it comes at the price of shallow ego-centricism, self-esteem that is fueled by how attractive her hookups are, and a struggle with bulimia. Beverly constantly covers herself up with expensive accessories and fake friends who only spend time with her in order to elevate their own status or to borrow her nice things.

Charlotte has as much of the "right stuff" as her male counterparts in Wolfe's other works of fiction, and yet her society punishes her by means of rejection, humiliation, and ultimately, the loss of her autonomous state. For Charlotte to access the "right stuff," she would have had to choose her relationships more carefully, rather than embark on a mission towards popularity,

¹⁴ See Wolfe's *Bonfire of the Vanities*, a New York City drama concerning ambition, social class, personal politics, racism, and greed, especially on Wall Street.

¹⁵ See Wolfe's *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, which follows Ken Kesey and his band of Merry Pranksters as they road trip around the country and experiment with drugs to achieve a better understanding of the world and their place in it.

¹⁶ See Wolfe's *The Right Stuff*, a novel about American pilots engaging in postwar experiments with rockets, other aircraft, and weapons, while following the stories of test pilots selected by NASA to explore outer space. Wolfe's novel intends to answer the question: where does one find the courage to risk their lives in going into outer space?

which, as it turns out, is quite shallow in and of itself. The novel concludes with Charlotte getting together with JoJo, not so much out of intense attraction as Charlotte's last jab at gaining status. The reader sees her cheering at a basketball game in which it "obviously behooved JoJo Johanssen's girlfriend to join in" (Wolfe 676). True, this serves as Wolfe's formal announcement to the reader that the two are a couple; but it also buries Charlotte's former mantra under her apparent success in gaining status as his partner. Thus it inadvertently supposes that a woman's opportunity for gained status comes from her union with a high-status male, and although she feels discontent, she does not show any intention of giving him up. The events of the novel really only teach Charlotte to "tame her conscience and tame her pride" (Berkowitz), which allows her to maintain a relationship with someone who offers her status and not much else, for as Wolfe himself reveals, "she is not really absorbed in him otherwise" (Iannone).

The outcome of the novel solidifies—and I think, reluctantly so—the fear that, even when motivated by something as accessible as the American dream and fortified with exceptional talent, one is "born already programmed, and that's that" (Iannone), and so conformity to the status quo is inevitable. What is momentous, though, is that the novel tries to create a persona who can resist conditioning, but it does not give her the means to do so, because in most cases those resources are not readily available, if they are available at all. Even more astonishing is the way that, although not a feminist text, it unleashes the truths of an experience saturated with the ideals of a patriarchal and, at times, overtly sexist society. Through Charlotte, the reader sees the verisimilitude and the importance of the college experience, especially for young women today, for not only is it a difficult slew of obstacles, but also a foundational time in the emergence of up-and-coming adults. Charlotte learns that adaptation and malleability are vital to her success as an intelligent woman; and she learns that for someone like her—that is, one with limited resources—status and protection

of the heterosexual relationship seem to be necessary for happiness. And perhaps the true fault of the universities—and society as a whole—is that they do *not* assist the individual in his or her fight to remain autonomous, but the opposite. As Wolfe claims, the solution is very simple:

“People in academia should start insisting on objective scholarship, *insisting* on it, relentlessly, driving the point home, ramming it down the gullets of the politically correct, making noise! naming names! citing egregious examples! showing contempt to the brink of brutality” (Iannone).

And I think there is much room for university curriculums to grow in the interest of social awareness and social justice, such as a reformed freshman seminar or general requirement program, accessible student-run conversations about gender, sex, and consent, and a faculty that knows how to dispel both overt and subliminal forms of discrimination. But maybe we need something a little different, *someone* different, who not only has the potential energy Charlotte does, but also the prerequisite of wisdom to choose her own relationships, to survive social pressure, and to engage the kinetic energy that will help her thrive, inspiring others to do the same. We are adults on our own at 18; perhaps what we really need to survive is more wisdom.

Übermensch

Elegance is wistful
Wishing to be full
And longing
To belong.

A song plays on the surface
Of the moon.
Soon the tune surrounds me
Astounds me
Brings me back to truth.

Youth yearns for yearning
Learning and unlearning
Hoping to see the light.

And I
Fight for I
To live, to strive
To ask
Why the world doesn't try
As hard as I do.

Under such momentous pleas
The body will cease to insist,
But I still wonder, and I resist
Because another world lies
Right ahead of me.

Epilogue

I've been wondering a lot about my place in society. I am about to be a young adult with a college education, and I am optimistic, but my hopefulness mixes with a bit of nerves, and the ensuing commotion reminds me of how small I really am. I have no hopes of being the next Tom Wolfe or Audre Lorde, but I do have hopes of being heard. I have hopes of refining and expanding my ability to observe the world and speak to it clearly, encouraging others to do the same.

After two years of working on this inquiry, I have learned to be an observer and to pick both my allies and my battles wisely. Not every friend is worth keeping, and not every problem is mine to fix. I've also learned that the path before me holds many challenges. Since becoming aware of the many systems of oppression at work in my culture, I have felt a responsibility to opt out of actions and relationships that support or perpetuate further injustice. I support plans of action against racism, homophobia, classism, and the like, because these are not systems that I wish to live in or abide by. I recognize, however, that some battles are mine to tackle more directly and personally, and for now, those are ones that aim to improve the lives of women and girls by creating a space for conversation.

Living in New York City on my own has been my dream since I was a kid. I've spent great time there as a child and teenager, oftentimes with my parents and oftentimes alone, but I have not been able to scrape the surface of what I want to do there. I want to get into the literary world and influence it. I want to get into activism and work towards what I believe to be true. With my new insights and goals, it has become even more of the logical choice for my unfolding career pursuits. It will provide the intellectual and artistic stimuli I need to work, as well as the resources. I have no doubt that I will find my place in a community that appreciates and spurs on the writing and

the action I want to take on, and in that way I know I will not always be alone. For we are social beings by nature, and it is our right to define what kind of relationships we allow into our lives.

We are also autonomous by nature, and so it is our basest need to sustain an existence that allows us to reach our fullest potential. I am in the process of reclaiming my womanhood, in terms that I understand from my experience as a woman and with other women. I aim to dismantle the forces that work against me, first by decoding them, and then by subverting them. I now have language and theory to help me do that. While the male gaze objectifies me, I aim to use the erotic as a means of gaining visibility and interest. While traditional images of femininity produce my fashion, my relationship to my gender expresses unique style. The trick is to make them think I'm playing the game, only to reveal that I play by my own rules. True, changing the rules does not change the board, but it sure complicates the outcome.

I take pride in the journey that has allowed me to break out of traditional gender roles, social expectations, and myths. My education in Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies has given me the theories and the strength and language to complicate a narrative that speaks in creative and academic words. It has helped my persona expand beyond the poetics and beyond my inherent prejudices, and I am thankful. Most of all, I treasure my experience, and I hope that each new experience strengthens and challenges my image as a *complicated femme*, as well as introduces me to others.

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