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Guilty Pleasures: Consumer Culture in the Fiction of Mary Quayle Innis

Donica Belisle

Between 1922 and 1947, Toronto historian and writer Mary Quayle Innis published over eighty short stories and one novel. Accomplished literary works in their own right, they are especially valuable for their treatment of consumer culture. In story after story, Innis explores consumer longing, conspicuous consumption, material disparity, and spousal conflict over purchases. For Innis, fiction was an outlet for investigating the personal and moral meanings of consumer capitalism, especially as they pertained to women.

One of the first things that students of fiction learn is that authors exist separately from narrators and characters. How narrators recount tales and how characters experience events are products of the author's craft. Nevertheless, a study of an author's fictional œuvre, especially one as substantial as that of Innis, makes it possible to pinpoint a writer's major preoccupations. The experiences of contemporary homemakers comprise the bulk of Innis's 1930s and 1940s tales, and the author pays special attention to wives and mothers of bourgeois, working-class, and destitute statuses. Innis's stories also reveal an interest in how economic power creates enjoyment for the privileged and marginalization for the non-privileged. Her fiction is thus rooted in prevailing social conditions and represents an attempt to work through issues she believed to be of pressing concern. Her interest in homemakers' lives and her explorations of power and marginality offer important insights into how English-speaking, middle-class women experienced the emergence of consumer capitalism in Canada during the first half of the twentieth century.

Born Mary Quayle in Ohio in 1899 and raised in the southern United States, Mary Quayle Innis obtained a bachelor's degree in English from the University

of Chicago in 1919. She married Ontario-born Harold Innis, her former economics instructor, who had been working on his doctorate. Harold accepted a position in political economy at the University of Toronto, and in 1921, the couple moved to Canada. They raised four children between 1923 and the 1950s; and while Harold became a renowned scholar and built his academic career, Mary looked after their children and home, helped Harold with his research and writing, entertained academic guests, attended faculty functions, and embarked on a remarkable lifetime of writing.[1]

Innis began publishing during the early years of her marriage. In the 1920s, she focused on fiction, but in the 1930s, she began authoring historical and non-fiction works. In 1935, drawing from her husband's and her own research, she published *An Economic History of Canada.* So well received was this book that it remained the standard Canadian economic history undergraduate text until the late 1950s. In 1936 and 1937, Innis published three articles on economic history, one of which was so highly regarded that it was republished "nearly 40 years later in a collection of classic historical essays on Upper Canada." In the early 1940s, Innis began publishing historical and travel sketches. Most of these appeared in *Saturday Night, Maclean's,* and the *Dalhousie Review,* of which the former two targeted popular readers, whereas the latter aimed at intellectuals.[2]

Given Innis's strong research background, one might see her decision to use fiction to study contemporary homemakers' experiences as curious. It was a logical choice, however. Few academics of this period conducted sustained or sensitive inquiries into domesticity, gender, or consumerism. Especially in the field of Canadian history, with which Innis was most familiar, scholars focused on politics, wars, trade, and exploration. The economy was a major interest as well, but Canadian economic theorists, including Harold Innis, believed consumption to be secondary to exports and trade. Economic historians and political economists of this period paid little attention to consumer motivation.[3]

A distaste among intellectuals regarding domestic issues, especially consumption, probably compounded Innis's fictional turn. Many English Canadian critics of the thirties and forties were appalled at the seemingly passive and conformist tendencies of mass culture, particularly movies, radio, and shopping. Into the 1950s, they portrayed mass culture as inimical to human creativity, community participation, and civic engagement. Appearing after Innis stopped publishing fiction, but nonetheless illustrative of this view, was the well-received *Crestwood Heights* (1956), a sociological study by J.R. Seeley, R.A. Sim, and E.W. Loosley of a Toronto suburb. As Veronica Strong-Boag notes, this book portrays suburbia as all that is wrong with modern life. Suburban fathers

were career-obsessed, mothers were narcissistic, and "both sexes were overly materialistic."[4]

Innis's position as a full-time mother and homemaker was another factor behind her use of fiction. It is significant that after her four children were grown, she concentrated again on historical research. She updated four of her husband's major books, wrote history texts for schoolchildren, authored a history of the Young Women's Christian Association, and edited Lady Simcoe's diaries as well as collections on women in Canada's past and on nursing education. When Innis's children were young and her husband busy, she would have had little time to conduct the research that these projects required. She thus turned to creative writing, a craft that did not demand prolonged research and in which she was gifted. Yet rather than being a stopgap in her career, her fictional record is both valuable and significant. Apart from being a formidable literary achievement, it gave Innis the intellectual freedom and space required to explore homemakers' lives, a decidedly unscholarly topic during her time. Indeed, it was perhaps the feminist conclusions she reached through her fiction that encouraged her later interest in women's history.[5]

With the exception of "Quarrel" (1922), Innis's five published stories from the 1920s are set in frontier and pioneer times. With "Recital" in 1930, she shifted to more contemporary settings. Between 1930 and 1935, she published ten stories in the *Canadian Forum,* a monthly Toronto-based periodical with a leftist view and a predominantly intellectual readership. In 1936, Innis published one story each in *Midland, the Publication of the Toronto Writers' Club,* and *New Frontier.* She found a new home in 1937 at the Toronto-based *Saturday Night,* in which she published approximately sixty-five stories over the next decade. With a circulation of approximately thirty thousand during this period, *Saturday Night* was a weekly magazine with a primarily liberal outlook; it printed political and economic commentary, arts and letters coverage, poetry, and fiction. Edited by former Queen's University English professor and well-known public intellectual B.K. Sandwell, it enjoyed, as Robert Fulford writes, "a position of eminence" that it "never reached ... since."[6] In 1943, Innis also published one novel, *Stand on a Rainbow,* with Collins in Toronto.

Though never fully autobiographical, Innis's fiction drew from personal experience. According to her daughter Anne Innis Dagg, Innis's interwar stories were "largely based on her life in Toronto," and her 1940s stories drew from "events recalled in Mrs. Innis's youth." During an interview with J. David Black, Dagg further indicated that *Stand on a Rainbow* was "drawn almost entirely from incidents in Mary's domestic life." It is impossible to pinpoint which stories

borrow most heavily from experience and which ones are purely fictive, and the exercise would be fruitless anyway because all fiction is to some extent invented. Yet Innis's sensitivity and talent enabled her to create characters and situations that are believable. She writes with such veracity that it is probable her insights into consumerism were based on personal experience and careful social observation.[7]

Exploring Consumers' Subjectivities

Perhaps in an effort to understand women's motivations for consuming, Innis made the attractions of consumption central to her exploration. Several pieces examine reasons compelling characters to go shopping, as well as the fun they have while in stores. In "Day to Keep Always" (1942), main character Leslie asks her three children about their favourite Christmas traditions. To her surprise, they all state that their annual trip to Woolworth's is their favourite. Leslie is disappointed, for it "seemed depressingly secular and material," and she always experienced it as a "nightmare." When she and her children visit Woolworth's that year, however, she changes her mind: "Inside the [store] door they stood together for a moment looking exultingly into the tangle of lights and garlands, the press of people." Thinks Leslie, "The movement and stabbing colour, the light, the clatter of talk made one dizzy and at the same time happy." She finally understands why the children get "intensely excited" about the trip. It "was a mixed spice of intrigue, curiosity, and speculation." And unlike other shopping expeditions, it is completely selfless. "It touched her to see so many people," including her own children, "preparing pleasure for other people."[8]

Not only does "Day to Keep Always" demonstrate that shopping need not be about buying things for oneself, so does it show that shopping can be sensual. The "bright crowded order of merchandise" and the "cheerful noise" are stimulating and comforting.[9] It was not only Christmas when Innis's characters experienced shopping as congenial. In "Holiday" (1932), wife and mother Nettie Samchuk visits a department store to take a break from her domestic routine. Although her family is "on the charities" and she is penniless, she enjoys admiring the giant retailer's perfume, dresses, garden furniture, children's clothing, and cakes. She finds it stimulating to smell and see these items, and to imagine what it would be like to own them. "Her favourite game," relates the narrator, is "to dress her children." By looking in the showcases, she "could choose outfits for all of them."[10] To explain Nettie's rationale for visiting a particular department store, the narrator states that she "had earned a holiday." She worked hard

at home, and now that "she was out she meant to stay a while."[11] Innis here suggests that homemakers treated shopping as a cost-free social outing that allowed them to escape their primary workplace.

Innis may have used some of her stories to convey the joys that homemakers took in shopping, but she was also aware that consumerism was multi-layered. One of the most interesting themes in her writing is that of consumption as antidote. Several of her works suggest that homemakers turned to shopping to alleviate feelings of inadequacy and loneliness. Her novel, *Stand on a Rainbow*, includes a scene in which main character Leslie pauses in front of a dress shop window. She reflects that whenever she thinks about "new clothes," she becomes "susceptible to a kind of seizure." When she tries on a new dress, she always thinks, "I never knew I could wear a dress like this and it's very becoming. I've been wearing stodgy old things that were too old for me." She would look "into the long mirror and [see] a young and lovely Leslie; it was incredible that a dress could make such a difference." She would think about "how surprised the children would be" and how "pleased" her husband. Soon "she could scarcely wait to put the dress on at home" and would buy the garment.[12] For Leslie, fashion is a way of feeling younger and prettier; it is also a way of gaining attention from her children and husband.

Lonely females' use of fashion to attain attention recurs throughout Innis's fiction. Frustrated by her husband's inattentiveness, and lonely for her children who had all moved "far away," Mrs. Archer of "The Wave" (1939) decides to perm her hair. "What would it be like to have [her husband] look at her with interest?" this homemaker wonders. It would be like the days when, after they were first married, he would say, "'Well, who've we got here?'" whenever she put on a new dress.[13] In "Staver" (1936), a bourgeois wife hopes to attain not her husband's attention through beauty, but that of an indigent man named Staver. He performs odd jobs such as grass cutting for her, and she reciprocates by paying him. She is lonely and begins looking forward to his visits, but he feels neither gratitude nor concern for her. One day she wears a "new blue dress and hat" and walks in "shining white shoes" over the grass he has just cut. She wishes "childishly that Staver would notice her." But instead of complimenting her, he asks for more money. Afterward, he stops visiting her. She thinks of him often and months later, believes she sees him downtown, wearing a suit. Assuming he has gotten work, "she felt her world go black." Exposing the loneliness that motivates some women to "do good," as well as the absurdity of the hope that destitute men might give middle-class women the comfort they desire, "Staver" is an ironic portrayal of women's use of fashion. Though its protagonist is aware

of the class gulf that separates her from Staver, she still hopes that her expensive clothes will attract him.[14]

These stories indicate that Innis believed some women turned to fashion and beauty to help them feel younger, happier, and more attractive. This connection between appearance, youth, satisfaction, and desirability is apparent not only in Innis's fiction, but in advertising geared toward women during this period. As Strong-Boag notes, the "overwhelming message ... was that women should devote additional time to the maintenance of looks that were on the downhill slope."[15] When combined with "Staver," *Stand on a Rainbow* and "The Wave" also suggest that women who felt lonely and drab resorted to fashion and beauty products. At times they relied solely on men, including their husbands and otherwise, for approval and love.

Innis's characters also employ consumption to attain status. In "The Party" (1931), Innis explores a working-class homemaker's use of home decor to elevate her standing. In preparation for a dinner party, main character Ethel purchases new objects for her home. For years her invited guests have looked down on her husband because they have "prophesied that he would never be able to support Ethel." This party is her chance to prove that she and her husband are "really wonderfully well off." Ethel's pursuit of status, however, goes deeper than proving herself to her guests. She also wants to prove her worth to herself. "Every day," she thinks, "she was buying round steak and looking for a really good dollar cleaner. Just this once she wanted to have the kind of bedspread and lamp shade you saw in the movies, the kind of refreshments they probably served at the government house."[16] In Ethel's view, it is unfair that she should have to budget, when other women do not. Indeed, the "society women in the picture section of the newspaper" daily experience "perfection." By splurging on new decor, Ethel attempts to realize the comfort and beauty she believes others enjoy.

Through Ethel, Innis examines the long-held theory, popularized by Thorstein Veblen in 1899, that consumer display is indicative of an attempt to climb the social ladder.[17] Innis recognizes that some women used consumer goods to reflect their desired social position, but she also suggests that their yearning for status-laden goods went beyond a simple wish for social advancement. Hopes for attractive homes arose not only from wishes to impress others, but from a desire to experience the consumerist ideal presented in newspapers, magazines, and movies. According to these media, a well-outfitted home was aesthetically pleasing, comfortable, and relaxing. Given that many homemakers spent their days working hard within their houses, it was logical that many would want attractive and comfortable furnishings. "The Party"

further suggests that preparing a beautiful home offered enjoyment to homemakers. Ethel is excited about her new bedspread and lampshade; she derives pleasure both from purchasing them and from displaying them.

In 1944, Innis put decorators' advice to homemakers under the microscope. "Lived-in Look; or Quaint Gourds and Pottery Figures" tells the tale of Mrs. Andrews, who reads a magazine that advises women to put "between meals a bowl of quaint gourds or a group of pottery figures" on the dining table, to "furnish your desk with a massive desk set of leather and brass or a handmade one of chintz," and to keep the home neatly organized. Mrs. Andrews reads the piece "wistfully," thinking that "probably no decorators had children." Every surface in her home is covered with the children's projects and toys; and the children are always misplacing things. She is thus surprised when the article advises that "the room must not appear too studied or immaculate. Leave an open book or a piece of needlework on the table to give the room a lived-in look." This suggestion is so ridiculous that she "threw down the magazine and began to laugh." "Lived-in Look" exposes the absurdity of trying to live up to the standards of decorators. Instead of attempting to match the ideals of magazines, Innis suggests, homemakers should simply relax.[18]

"Lived-in Look" reveals Innis's belief that homemakers felt pressured to live up to decorating ideals. Since decorators and magazines pushed the idea that furnishings were "an index" to a woman's character, homemakers felt that if they failed to decorate according to the norm, they would also fail to prove their femininity.[19] One cannot know whether Innis herself experienced this pressure, but as a middle-class homemaker who entertained frequently, she was surely aware that standards existed. "Lived-in Look" suggests that homemakers were influenced by advice on consumption. Cultural studies scholar Mica Nava rightly points out that advertising is a flawed historical source in the sense that researchers cannot ascertain whether consumers agreed with or even paid attention to its promises.[20] Yet "Lived-in Look" indicates that at least one perceptive and articulate midcentury writer believed the media influenced homemakers' thoughts and actions.

Innis's fiction also investigates another area of homemaking in which experts felt compelled to give advice: grocery buying. Since the early 1920s, home economists had been urging North American women to prepare detailed grocery lists. These would enable them to choose healthy items and avoid impulse buys, and aid them in their menus. As Innis's "Opportunists' Day" (1943) indicates, though, wartime shortages made it impossible to shop according to plan. On her way to the store, main character Leslie meets her neighbour, Mrs. Barker,

who shows her a shopping list, a "neatly typed sheet of seven menus." Mrs. Barker says she follows a "businesslike" and "simple" method, easy to produce for "anyone" who "puts her mind to it." For years, Leslie has "been overawed by the systematic shopping of women like Mrs. Barker but overwhelmed by the variety of foodstuffs before her." Thanks to the current shortages, though, "bewildering variety" is a thing of the past. Leslie simply purchases whatever is available. In the store she sees Mrs. Barker leaning on the cheese counter to "make a pencil notation; already the list looked like a hotly contested battleground." Frustrated, Mrs. Barker tells Leslie that due to all the shortages, she cannot follow her menus. Leslie feels "positively smug," for her "simple-minded openness to suggestion had become a virtue." As in "Lived-in Look," "Opportunists' Day" offers a humorous but pointed criticism of experts' advice to homemakers. Demonstrating the pressure that women feel to live up to standards, as well as the effort required to do so, it proposes that women should ease up in their quests for perfection.[21]

Innis also recognized that consumption could be arduous. Foreshadowing by almost thirty years the second-wave feminist argument that consumerism is first and foremost domestic labour, her writings probe the difficulties of homemakers' consumer chores.[22] After spending her summer at a cottage, Leslie of *Stand on a Rainbow* dreads returning to the city. She thinks of "the instant necessity for haircuts, new shoes and trips to the dentist ... the binding autumn routine of music lessons, library books, birthday parties, errands and allowances, winter clothes, longer skis, larger skates, rubber boots, more new shoes and more haircuts." For her, shopping for children's goods is a tiresome component of her endless workload.[23] Ethel of "The Party" also experiences consumption as work. She rents an electric polisher and uses it to clean her floors. It makes her muscles stiff, and "she felt depressingly certain that the society hostesses in the paper didn't have backs that ached the way hers did."[24]

Disappointment pervades the consumer experiences of Innis's characters. Believing that women sometimes buy fashion and decor to assuage loneliness or desires for social prestige, Innis implies that those who transfer their hopes onto material goods will become frustrated. Such is the case in *Stand on a Rainbow,* when Leslie wears new clothes at home. The children are indeed "surprised" and her husband "pleased," but "their emotion" would never be "as keen as she had thought it would be." In "front of the mirror," she will see "defects": one dress will be "too full," another "too narrow" or "too blue." Even though the same process occurs with every new purchase, her "disappointment" is never "lessened" and she repeats the procedure "every season."[25]

Through *Stand on a Rainbow,* Innis suggests that women's vague frustrations with homemaking could not be solved by consumption. In contrast to Keynesian wartime theorists who proposed that consumption was the key to post-war reconstruction, she demonstrates that consumerism was at best an ambiguous activity. Preceding Betty Friedan's famous 1963 assertion that domesticity and consumerism could cause depression and frustration among women, *Stand on a Rainbow* indicates that at least one middle-class midcentury Toronto homemaker questioned the ability of goods to create happiness.[26]

Consumption and Inequality

Innis also investigated the social dynamics of consumption. Spousal economic inequality was a particular concern. In "Somebody from Home" (1937), a woman named Dora who has moved with her husband to Florida because his health is too fragile for Ontario's weather is homesick. Prior to moving, they sold all their possessions, against Dora's will, because her husband did not want to pay for their transport. Dora now misses "the furniture that had been her mother's" and the "gold band china" that had been in her family for a hundred years.[27] Showing that women's stereotypical love of goods arose not only from superficiality but from memories of family and stability, Innis here depicts the hardship that male authority can inflict on women. She also provides further evidence for Joy Parr's argument, which was based on interviews conducted with Canadian women who furnished their homes during the 1940s and 1950s, that some women prized certain goods not because they were status-laden, but because they reminded the interviewees of their parents and grandparents.[28]

Ethel of "The Party" similarly chafes against male authority. In this instance, the focus is the inability of Ethel's husband, Todd, to understand her consumer desires. She hides her new dress from him and hopes he does not notice their new bedspread, lampshade, and ornament. She has long desired these items but could never "explain to Todd" the rationale behind her craving. To her dismay he notices the new purchases as soon as he arrives home from work. As Ethel predicts, he becomes angry. When he learns that supper is not yet ready, and when, simultaneously, their toddler begins crying, his anger deepens. In his view, Ethel's new acquisitions and neglect of household responsibilities represent her wifely failings. Readers, however, are meant to sympathize not with Todd, but with Ethel. Having performed her domestic tasks without complaint, the upcoming dinner party represents for her a moment of esteem and relaxation. In "The Party," Innis resists the easy characterization of male breadwinner as

proletarian hero, a trope common among leftists of this period, and delves into material conflict between spouses in the upper tier of the working class.[29]

In Innis's fiction, consumption exacerbates broader social oppression. In "Brotherhood" (1935), the author attempts to understand what it is like for a working-class woman of a minority ethnic group to attend an "All Nations Banquet." Anna, the story's heroine, goes to the banquet with her husband. They have been invited as representatives of the country Natovia. Her husband enjoys the evening, especially the free dinner, but Anna feels like an oversized object on display for the amusement of the dainty "ladies," whose "powdered and cool" faces contrast with her hot and sweating body. She cannot eat, for the ladies are "watching," and she is nervous "about which spoon was the one to use." When her husband gives a speech about brotherhood, his face is "hot and shiny," and "she felt sure ... they were laughing at him." She becomes embarrassed by his "brown suit and red tie" because "the other men had on white and black," and she cannot wait to go home. The ironically titled "Brotherhood" thus portrays affluent Toronto society from the perspective of an ethnic and financial outsider, and suggests that what appears respectable to middle-class Torontonians can cause anguish for those who exist outside this circle. Perhaps influenced by Innis's own encounters with staid Toronto society, "Brotherhood" exemplifies her interest in the way that financial clout, social difference, and commodity display contribute to social alienation. The affluent men and women at the function do not intend to estrange Anna, but their garments and customs make her feel like a laughable outsider.[30]

Innis often used the possessions and consumerism of affluent characters to throw destitute characters' poverty into high relief. One of the most poignant if simplistic of these scenarios occurs in "Two Ears" (1933), in which the narrator recounts a streetcar encounter. Sitting on a bench in the back, she is privy to two conversations. On her left two "well-dressed" women complain about their gardeners and chauffeurs; they also chat about which clothes and hairstyles they intend to purchase. On her right a young "poorly dressed" married couple discuss their options. Having lost their home, they have decided to live separately. The wife, crying, is taking her baby to her father's place in the country; the husband will live homeless in the city and look for work. An unbiased observer, the narrator does not profess outrage at the social gulf between the two parties. Instead, Innis uses their conversations to incite the reader's anger. As the young wife and her baby disembark at the train station, the affluent women talk loudly and unselfconsciously about their expensive wardrobes. The story ends with the destitute husband staring "out of the window long after the [train] station

had been passed" and finally looking "silently down at his hands spread open on his threadbare knees."[31]

"Two Ears" offers an excellent example of Innis's belief that the affluent choose to be oblivious of the destitute. "News from Abroad" (1940), a more sophisticated story, reiterates this theme. Told from the point of view of a young woman named Eloise, who has just returned from Europe and is visiting her teacher, Miss Gilder, the piece implies that women who place adventure and fashion above all else marginalize others. Eloise had dreaded the visit because she views Miss Gilder as a drab soul who "wore hard, plain tweedy things which showed her unmerciful angles and her short, straight hair was gray over her ears." After she arrives, she is delighted to learn that Miss Gilder lives with her mother, who is "stout and handsome with beautifully waved mauve-tinged hair and tinted nails." Miss Gilder's eagerness to hear about Eloise's cultural experiences in Europe annoys Eloise, who prefers chatting with Mrs. Gilder about shopping, fashion, and beauty. The elder woman's stylishness and frivolity encourage Eloise to "feel sorry for her for having such a plain, mannish daughter." Fed up with her daughter's questions about Europe, Mrs. Gilder finally asks her why she herself does not visit it. Yet Eloise already knows the answer, for "no teacher in the school could live in a lovely apartment like this and support such a smart-looking mother and have a cent left over." Despite her recognition of Miss Gilder's selfless support of her mother, however, she still prefers Mrs. Gilder. A subtle morality tale, "News from Abroad" conveys Innis's message that privileged people choose to ignore the suffering of the marginalized.[32]

The Morality of Consumption

Of all the characters who recur in different guises in Innis's fiction, that of the superficial woman is especially significant. Not only in "Two Ears" and "News from Abroad," but in the above-mentioned "Holiday" as well as in "Donna, You're the Oldest" (1945), self-centred and materialistic women oppress less privileged females.[33] In "Holiday," Nettie wants to enjoy the department store's displays, but her shabby attire causes so many saleswomen and customers to treat her rudely that her visit is almost ruined.[34] In "Donna," the six-year-old title character is taking a train trip with her family. Her harried mother expects her to entertain her three younger siblings. Two affluent women sit in the seat across from Donna. Bored, they decide to play with her. They wash her tear-stained face, comb her hair, give her chocolates, entreat her to sing, and let her play with their makeup and jewellery. They then go to dinner; after their meal,

they are tired and ignore the child. In hopes of regaining their attention, Donna attempts to act cute, but the women brush her off, leaving her devastated.[35]

When considered in tandem with Innis's position as a middle-class homemaker, these portrayals of superficial women indicate that the author felt guilty about her own affluence. At the same time, her frequent depictions of homemakers as women without financial power suggest that she herself was frustrated at her own lack of income. These twin themes come together powerfully in "The Gift" (1934), which focuses on a bourgeois housewife named Judith who receives a note from the mother of her first husband, asking that she attend his funeral. Prior to receiving the letter, Judith had been thinking that she needed a new fur coat and that her present husband had refused to give her the $100 for its purchase. After receiving the note, she decides to abandon her plans for shopping, lunch, tea, and bridge, and to attend her first husband's funeral. When she arrives, she is reminded of his family's poverty. The gathered women "looked disapprovingly from her smart to their own scrubby black." After the service, her ex-mother-in-law, who has treated her kindly throughout, gives her a sealed envelope, saying that her ex-father-in-law had saved it for her. Judith finally extricates herself and takes the train home. She "relaxed in the comfort of the club car and looked at the bored, well-dressed people around her." She is glad to be "getting home again to her own world"; it is "comforting to feel the dark dream" of her previous "helpless and vulnerable" life "abate." At that point, she opens the envelope. It contains $100.[36]

"The Gift" illuminates what it may have been like for a woman of this period to experience upward mobility. Judith is aware of the difficulties of the poor; she herself had once "worried so ... over food bills and had made soups and stews without end."[37] The narrator does not state that Judith feels guilty about climbing the social ladder, but her thoughts do hint at her discomfort. Sitting in her bright home, she thinks of her dead husband, "who had worshipped the sun." He "would have loved this house." She also thinks it "queer" that "a second fur coat should be as necessary to her now as one decent pair of stockings had been then." Innis intends the story to make middle-class readers uncomfortable. While Judith obsessed about getting a "white fur" bunny coat, so as to camouflage her "matronly" figure and help her look "girlish," her destitute ex-father-in-law had saved $100 for her. Despite Innis's characterization of Judith as superficial, however, she is also aware of bourgeois housewives' own struggles. Judith's husband keeps her on an "allowance," and she feels pressure to maintain a stylish and youthful appearance so as to please him and keep her affluent friends. "The Gift" is thus a sensitive study of middle-class female consumerism,

one that portrays both the self-centredness of bourgeois homemakers and their lack of control over their own financial situation.

Into the late 1940s, Innis remained suspicious of consumerism's broader social consequences. One of the last stories she published, "Hair Ribbon" (1947), shows how affluent consumerism marginalizes less privileged people. In this story, which no doubt draws on Innis's childhood experience of moving with her family from the northern USA to Georgia, a young girl named Erie moves to a small southern town. Against her mother's wishes, she makes friends with a girl named Sadie. Sadie's braids are "twisted round with rubber bands" and are crooked and fuzzy as though they have not been combed out for a long time. When Erie looks at them, she thinks "comfortably of the fresh ribbon above her own shining braids." One day, her mother notices that her ribbon, the "good pink one with the corded edge," is missing. They look for it in the field where Erie and Sadie had been playing but cannot find it. Following her mother's instructions, Erie asks Sadie where it is. In response, Sadie says that she will be right back; when she returns, she is "red and breathless," and she states that they should look for the ribbon in the field. Sure enough, Erie finds it there. Her mother again forbids her to play with Sadie, but her father winks at her, saying that Erie is "broadening."[38]

Erie is oblivious to the class difference between herself and Sadie, and she does not realize that Sadie stole her ribbon. Yet the careful description of the girls' braids, the mother's dislike of Sadie, and the father's comment about the friendship as a "broadening" experience indicate that the reader is meant to recognize that Sadie stole the ribbon due to envy over Erie's comfortable home life. "Hair Ribbon" is thus intended to create reader guilt. Readers are expected to feel embarrassed by the mother's maintenance of class distance and ashamed that Sadie does not have shining braids or pretty ribbons.[39]

Conclusion

"Hair Ribbon" contains many of the themes to which Innis repeatedly returned during the thirties and forties: power, oppression, inequality, femininity, and consumerism. A mother of four, a published and talented historian, a loving wife, a gifted writer, and a brilliant observer of human relations, Mary Quayle Innis was in a unique position to explore these issues with sensitivity and depth. References to them in her fictional oeuvre enable one to reach some conclusions about what it was like to be an English-speaking, middle-class homemaker during the thirties and forties in Toronto.

Innis's fiction explored both the positive and the negative sides of consumption. She recognized that shopping, dresses, and beauty treatments could offer pleasure, status, and fulfillment. At the same time, she was uncomfortable with the motivations compelling women to seek these products. Loneliness, isolation, and a feeling of inadequacy spurred many of her female characters to look for solace in the consumer marketplace. Innis was also uneasy with the consequences of consumption. Superficial female characters obsessed with their own images and possessions appear again and again in her tales. In such stories as "Donna," "The Gift," "Two Ears," and "Brotherhood," their words and actions work to further marginalize those who are already economically and socially disadvantaged.

Taken as a whole, Innis's fiction indicates that this scholar, writer, and homemaker was deeply troubled by the social and economic positions in which many English Canadian women found themselves during the 1930s and 1940s. Showing many to be lonely and dependent on their husbands for approval and financial support, she suggests that motherhood and wifehood offered limited fulfillment. She also implies that women's attempts to remedy their dissatisfactions through consumer goods were themselves dissatisfying. Not only did new purchases fail to fulfill buyers' expectations, so did their display contribute to social alienation and inequality. Even those women who sought to remedy such inequality, such as the philanthropists in "Brotherhood" and the charitable woman in "Staver," were hampered in their efforts to relieve oppression by their own inabilities to reach beyond their affluence and displays of privilege.

Ultimately, Innis's fiction suggests that the socially acceptable avenues of fulfillment open to middle-class women in Toronto during this period were untenable. Motherhood, marriage, consumption, and philanthropy, though offering certain rewards, did not deliver their promised ideals. It is therefore significant that after her children left home, and after her husband's death in 1952, Innis decided to enter a "more public life," as Barbara Pell puts it. In 1955, at the age of fifty-six, she became dean of women at University College, at the University of Toronto, a position she held for nine years. She also served in 1959 as a "Canadian delegate to the Commonwealth Conference on Education held in Oxford"; other positions included being vice chairperson of the Committee on Religious Education in Ontario's public schools.[40]

Innis's fiction is significant on another level as well. Touching on many of the constraining attributes of middle-class womanhood in the thirties and forties, it deepens historical understandings of 1960s feminism. As Innis's fiction reveals, calls for more equality between spouses, better integration of women

into public life, and some feminists' rejection of materialism had their roots in the experiences of women in preceding decades. At the same time, the coming of second-wave feminism does not mean that Innis's stories are now irrelevant. Such post-war movements as feminism may have remedied some of North America's ills, but gender inequality, social alienation, economic marginalization, and rampant consumer culture are still major features of contemporary life. Today more than ever, it seems, such trenchant and sensitive explorations of consumerism as those offered by Mary Quayle Innis are necessary.

Notes

1 Barbara Pell, "Innis, Mary Quayle," *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, vol. 88, *Canadian Writers, 1920-1959*, 2nd ser., ed. W.H. New (Detroit: Gale Group, 1989), 132-34.

2 Anne Innis Dagg, "Mary Quayle Innis (1899-1972)," *A Biographical Dictionary of Women Economists*, ed. Robert W. Dimand, Mary Ann Dimand, and Evelyn L. Forget (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar, 2000), 224; Mary Quayle Innis, *An Economic History of Canada* (Toronto: Ryerson, 1935); Mary Quayle Innis, "The Record of an Epidemic," *Dalhousie Review* 16 (1936): 55-60; Mary Quayle Innis, "Philip Henry Gosse in Canada," *Dalhousie Review* 17 (1937): 55-60; Mary Quayle Innis, "The Industrial Development of Ontario, 1783-1820," *Ontario Historical Society* 32 (1937): 104-13, republished in *Historical Essays on Upper Canada*, ed. J.K. Johnson (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1975), 140-52.

3 Bettina Liverant, "Buying Happiness: English Canadian Intellectuals and the Development of Canadian Consumer Culture" (PhD thesis, University of Alberta, 2008), 214-16; see also Chapter 1 in this volume.

4 Veronica Strong-Boag, "Home Dreams: Women and the Suburban Experiment in Canada, 1945-1960," in *Rethinking Canada: The Promise of Women's History*, 3rd ed., ed. Veronica Strong-Boag and Anita Clair Fellman (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1997), 391; Len Kuffert, *A Great Duty: Canadian Responses to Modern Life and Mass Culture, 1939-1967* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003).

5 Mary Quayle Innis, *Unfold the Years: A History of the Young Women's Christian Association in Canada* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1949); Mary Quayle Innis, *Changing Canada*, 2 vols. (Toronto: Clarke Irwin, 1951); Mary Quayle Innis, *Living in Canada* (Toronto: Clarke Irwin, 1954); Mary Quayle Innis, *Travellers West* (Toronto: Clarke Irwin, 1956); Mary Quayle Innis, ed., *Mrs. Simcoe's Diary* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1965); Mary Quayle Innis, ed., *The Clear Spirit: Twenty Canadian Women and Their Times* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1966); Mary Quayle Innis, ed., *Nursing Education in a Changing Society* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1970).

6 Robert Fulford, "Introduction," in *Saturday Night Scrapbook*, ed. Morris Wolfe (Toronto: New Press, 1973), xii.

7 Anne Innis Dagg, "Preface," in "Selected Short Works of Mary Quayle Innis" (unpublished monograph, GA 127-11a, University of Waterloo Library, Waterloo), n.p.; J. David Black, "'Both of Us Can Move Mountains': Mary Quayle Innis and Her Relationship to Harold Innis' Legacy," *Canadian Journal of Communications* 28, 4 (2003): para. 11.

8 Mary Quayle Innis, "Day to Keep Always," *Saturday Night*, 12 December 1942, 48, 49.

9 Ibid., 48.

10 Mary Quayle Innis, "Holiday," *Canadian Forum*, June 1932, 141.

11 Ibid., 140.

12 Mary Quayle Innis, *Stand on a Rainbow* (Toronto: Collins, 1943), 162, 163.

13 Mary Quayle Innis, "The Wave," *Saturday Night,* 23 December 1939, 20.
14 Mary Quayle Innis, "Staver," in *Voices of Discord: Canadian Short Stories from the 1930s,* ed. Donna Phillips (Toronto: New Hogtown Press, 1979), 177, 181.
15 Veronica Strong-Boag, *The New Day Recalled: Lives of Girls and Women in English Canada, 1919-1939* (Toronto: Copp Clark Pitman, 1988), 181-82.
16 Mary Quayle Innis, "The Party," in Phillips, *Voices of Discord,* 152, 154.
17 Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study in the Evolution of Institutions* (New York: Macmillan, 1899).
18 Mary Quayle Innis, "Lived-in Look; or Quaint Gourds and Pottery Figures," *Saturday Night,* 2 December 1944, 36, 37.
19 Ibid., 37.
20 Mica Nava, "Framing Advertising: Cultural Analysis and the Incrimination of Visual Texts," in *Buy This Book: Studies in Advertising and Consumption,* ed. Mica Nava et al. (New York: Routledge, 1997), 35-50.
21 Mary Quayle Innis, "Opportunists' Day," *Saturday Night,* 20 November 1943, 33.
22 Ellen Willis, "'Consumerism' and Women," in *Voices from Women's Liberation,* ed. Leslie B. Tanner (New York: New American Library, 1971), 307-13.
23 Innis, *Stand on a Rainbow,* 9.
24 Innis, "The Party," 153-54.
25 Innis, *Stand on a Rainbow,* 162, 163.
26 Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (1963; repr., New York: Norton, 2001).
27 Mary Quayle Innis, "Somebody from Home," *Saturday Night,* 1 May 1937, 9.
28 Joy Parr, *Domestic Goods: The Material, the Moral, and the Economic in the Postwar Years* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 185-86. Parr also notes, however, that many Canadian women decorated in a modern style, so as to differentiate their homes from those of their parents.
29 Innis, "The Party," 151-57.
30 Mary Quayle Innis, "Brotherhood," *Canadian Forum,* February 1935, 188, 189.
31 Mary Quayle Innis, "Two Ears," *Canadian Forum,* August 1933, 420, 421.
32 Mary Quayle Innis, "News from Abroad," *Saturday Night,* 13 January 1940, 20.
33 Mary Quayle Innis, "Donna, You're the Oldest, Come Here, Donna, Sing, Donna," *Saturday Night,* 29 September 1945, 32-33.
34 Innis, "Holiday," 140-42.
35 Innis, "Donna, You're the Oldest," 32-33.
36 Mary Quayle Innis, "The Gift," *Canadian Forum,* June 1934, 349, 350, 351.
37 Ibid., 350.
38 Mary Quayle Innis, "Hair Ribbon," *Saturday Night,* 1 March 1947, 25.
39 Ibid.
40 Pell, "Innis, Mary Quayle," 132, 134.