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GENDERED SATIRE IN DAWN POWELL'S *ANGELS ON TOAST*

MA thesis

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ABSTRACT

This thesis employs thematical analysis to conduct a gendered reading of Dawn Powell's satirical novel *Angels on Toast* (1940). The central theme of the empirical analysis is performative identity, presented through the portrayal of the male and female characters and the idealised romantic relationships. The thesis includes an introduction that gives a brief overview of Powell and the novel, in addition identifying the research gap. This is followed by a literature review that covers humour, satire and the gendered subcategories of the two. Previous scholarship on Powell's work is also discussed and the methodology introduced. The analysis is divided into two subchapters, which analyse the representation of the themes through the satirical techniques of exaggeration, irony and incongruity. The conclusion summarises the main findings of the thesis.

Keywords: gendered satire, performed identity, Dawn Powell, thematical analysis

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INTRODUCTION

Dawn Powell (1896-1965) was an American author, playwright and short-story writer. Born in Ohio, she moved to New York in 1918 to pursue a career in writing (Lebowitz 2003: 231). These two locations are often used to categorise her work into novels portraying either small town life or Manhattan. Powell was embedded in New York literary culture and was in contact with major figures such as John Dos Passos, Josephine Herbst and Ernest Hemingway (Kosiba 2010: 47). As a writer, her work does not comfortably fall into either of the mainstream literary movements of the time, high modernism and proletarian realism. Instead, her work could be described as satirical realism, specifically with attention to social performance, gender and urban life in general.

Powell was a prolific novelist, publishing 15 novels, many short stories and plays during the period of 1925-1962. Her works are often satiric, using the genre to depict society (Fuchs-Abrams 2024: 141). Among other things, she employs satire to challenge gender normative messages (Keyser 2010: 111), thus delivering social critique in most of her work. *Angels on Toast* (1940) is not an exception. It is one of Powell's New York novels which is considered among her more important works (Lebowitz 2003: 233). The story centers around two businessmen evading their wives and navigating the world of capitalism, while highlighting gendered double standards and the performative aspect of male and female identities, that is, the construction of one's identity through repeated socially expected behaviours in order to gain social approval.

Powell's popularity during her lifetime was twofold. On the one hand, her work received praise from her contemporaries (Kosiba 2010: 47). For instance she was awarded the Marjorie Peabody Waite Award in 1964 for lifetime achievement in literature (Palermo 2016: 1). Ernest Hemingway also claimed that her work was among his literary favourites (Kosiba 2010: 53). Powell gained broader recognition at the end of the twentieth century. Gore Vidal

published two influential essays on her in the *New York Review of Books*, titled “Dawn Powell, the American Writer” (1987) and “Dawn Powell: Queen of the Golden Age” (1996), which are considered the start of her first revival (Lebowitz 2003: 233). During the same time, four of her major novels (*The Golden Spur*, *Angels on Toast*, *The Locusts Have No King* and *The Wicked Pavilion*) also came back in print and almost all of her novels were back in print by the 1990s (Lebowitz 2003: 233-234).

On the other hand, she was sometimes overlooked and dismissed as an unserious writer due to the entertainment-oriented nature of her work and on account of her gender (Levy 1997: 15). Some authors attribute her dismissal to her criticism of the publishing industry, for example in her novel *A Time to Be Born* (1942) (Fuchs-Abrams 2024: 144). Other scholars maintain that the reason for her relative obscurity is due to the tone of her work. For instance, Lebowitz (2003: 232) has explained Powell’s work thus: “Her comic but ultimately lethal acerbity was simply too off-putting in the early and middle decades of the twentieth century”. Critics often reproached her cynicism, although she herself said that she depicted people simply as she saw them (Tufel 2002: 159).

Another potential reason her works did not receive the same critical attention as some of her contemporaries might be due to the perceived middlebrow nature of her work. Publishers often promoted Powell’s work as stories of entertainment in order to sell them better (Tufel 2002: 156-157). Powell herself did not agree with this take, claiming her work to be serious satires (Tufel 2002: 156-157). Such (mis)categorisation of Powell’s work is not uncommon. Middlebrow literature catered to middle-class readers (Keyser 2010: 8). By including features of both high and low culture, it also symbolised the rapidly changing world, such as emerging mass culture and shifts in gender roles (Keyser 2010: 8; Creadick 2016). It began to be associated with consumer culture in the U.S. after World War II (Creadick 2016), consequently acquiring a negative connotation, as literary critics believed its form and content to be

conservative and inferior to critically acclaimed highbrow literature (Ehland & Wächter 2016: 2; Schaub 2013: 11). Increasing numbers of critics argue that such distinction of literary merit is not productive. For example, Ehland and Wächter (2016: 2) stress that middlebrow literature provides access to public tastes and values that modernist texts, read by more limited audiences, do not necessarily reveal.

In addition to being associated with the middle classes, middlebrow literature is also tied to women writers and considered inferior because of this gendered association (Creadick 2016; Ehland and Wächter 2016: 5). This was often a question of access, as it was harder for women writers to gain entry to the literary establishment. Thus it was common for popular women writers of the mid-twentieth century to embrace commercialism as an entry point to the literary market (Keyser 2010: 8-9). However, Keyser (2010: 8) claims that their writing also represented changing gender norms and other social shifts. This can also be said about the work of Powell who records changing norms of gender, including the world of professional women, and interpersonal relationships.

Although there is not much academic research on Powell's work, the existing scholarship has, for example, focused on her work published in magazines. Ashley Lawson (2018) discusses Powell's short stories in *College Humor*, published in 1927-1931. In addition to contributing to the work done on Powell by analysing short stories, Lawson (2018: 200) establishes that Powell's work criticised the gender expectations of the time. Catherine Keyser's (2010) work focuses on Powell as a middlebrow magazine humorist. Keyser (2010: 7) argues that Powell's work reflected frustration regarding the limitations of the roles of women. These seemingly second-tier publications are significant in the context of the analysis in this thesis. Lawson (2018: 200) highlights the importance of magazines in providing means for female writers to protest restrictive gender ideals: what could not be expressed as explicit social critique could be stated through a humorous lens. Powell is not alone in this respect.

Lawson (2018: 201-202) connects Powell's short fiction to the progressive agenda of the 1920s, where women writers used venues provided by middlebrow forums to critique the models of womanhood of the period. The magazines often addressed gendered stereotypes and heterosocial topics, creating a space where writers like Powell could unsettle the norms (Keyser 2010: 5-6). Portraying ironic, over-romanticised relationships allowed her to indirectly question whether the ideals being promoted in society at the time were really as empowering as was claimed (Lawson 2018: 216).

The scholarship on *Angels on Toast* is limited, and it has not been analysed from a gendered perspective. The primary aim of this thesis is to analyse how the satiric tools of exaggeration, irony and incongruity are employed to critique gender roles and power structures within the 1930s Manhattan circles that are portrayed in the novel. In the context of this thesis, gendered satire is understood as a form of satire that indirectly criticises normative gender-related ideas, stereotypes and roles (Bertucci 2017: 82).

The thesis is guided by two research questions: What kind of gendered criticism is present in the novel and how is satire used to deliver it? By portraying characters who both participate in and critique the patriarchal system, does the satire reinforce or destabilise the status quo? Given that Powell's work is relatively understudied, the thesis hopes to highlight women writers that have not have received the recognition given to their male counterparts.

The thesis is divided into two main chapters. The literature review discusses previous scholarship on humor and satire and defines the terms as they will be used in the thesis. The subsections will also offer insights into how these literary forms have been gendered and which differences arise in terms of themes or style. In addition, the literature review provides a brief summary of the literary research that is available on Powell's work. The empirical analysis chapter offers a gendered reading of *Angels on Toast*. The satirical portrayal of men, women, and romantic ideals will be analysed. These themes reflect some of the central points of social

critique that are present in the novel, and will thus help to reveal the gendered aspect of Powell's satire.

1 LITERATURE REVIEW: GENDERING HUMOUR AND SATIRE

In order to analyse Powell's satire as gendered, working definitions of humour, satire and its techniques will be established to provide a clearer framework regarding the empirical section of the thesis. The literature review seeks to offer insight into these notions in order to situate the empirical analysis into a wider context of gendered satire. In addition, an overview of previous scholarship on Powell will reveal central themes of her novels and will thus establish the research gap the thesis aims to fill.

There is disagreement among scholars regarding the definitions of satire. Some consider it a subcategory of humour, whereas others position it as a separate mode. In the context of this thesis, humour is a genre the chief aim of which is the inducement of laughter. To varying degrees, humour is always analytical and critical, as its main point is about what it attempts to escape from (Gray et al 2009: 8). Satire, however, does not need to produce laughter. In this thesis, satire is understood as a genre which delivers indirect criticism by locating a vice in society (Draitser 1994: xxi). The satirical techniques that will be used for conducting the empirical analysis are exaggeration, irony, and incongruity. However, other techniques such as illumination, inversion and parody will be briefly discussed as well.

Although the aim of this thesis is not to divide Powell's satire strictly into categories such as feminist humour or satire, the literature review gives an overview of both humour and satire. It also touches upon some of the discussions that have taken place in regards to gender. It is also important to note that although the thesis aims to distinguish humour and satire, the two sometimes overlap, as humour is often used as an umbrella term.

1.1. Humour And Feminist Humour

The academic scholarship on humour reveals that it often surpasses mere entertainment. For one, it offers valuable insights into a culture's values, beliefs and attitudes (Walker 1988:

24). The topicality of societal issues is often revealed through what people find amusing and social codes are closely tied to all things humorous (Case and Lippard 2009: 241; Caron 2021: 21). Humour can be an indicator of societal moral beliefs (Bergman 1986). This often establishes in-groups, as people who belong to the same social groups, either in public or private lives, are more likely to joke with one another, because humour requires mutual knowledge (Bing 2004: 23; Voss 2021: 22). It becomes a display of intelligence, and not being perceived funny often also means not being considered intelligent (Voss 2021: 23).

Humour always potentially criticises or comment on social norms (Gray et al 2009: 9). For one, it helps to destabilise conventional power structures and narratives, or even aid in subverting hierarchies (Bing 2004: 23; Reisman 2013: 45). It helps to reveal mistakes of the powerful, for instance by offering an alternative perspective to an issue that has been previously handled from a dominant position, without democratic dialogue (Dadlez 2011: 10-11). Thus, it can be a valuable weapon in ideological battles. Humour has been specifically named as a symptom of modernity, “because the alienated individual felt stuck in systems beyond his control” (Keyser 2010: 7). Laughter could be employed to overcome this unease, hence helping individuals to question the status quo and also challenge familiar thought patterns (Case and Lippard 2009: 251; Fishkin 2011: 242).

However, humour can also reinforce boundaries and stereotypes by supporting the values of the group in power (Bing 2004: 23-24). Other authors point out that humour can operate on two levels, one which expresses conformity on the superficial level and that which protests that conformity (Walker 1985a: 119). Nancy Walker (1988: 23) claims that “Most humour theorists agree that the creation of humour requires the ability to stand apart from the reality of one’s existence and to view that existence with detachment and objectivity”.

Gender is one topic that is widely discussed in the context of humour (Case and Lippard 2009: 241). Male humorists have made fun of women’s supposed follies for centuries.

Traditionally, indeed, men have been the authors of jokes and women their targets. Women's humour has found its way to books and stage much less frequently before the twentieth century. The question of whether humour is somehow gendered has thus become a topic of discussion relatively recently. Among others, Nancy Walker (1988), Shelley Fisher Fishkin (2011) and Alfred Habegger (1982) maintain that women writers' use of humour differs from that of men's. Some authors (e.g., Kein 2015: 673) therefore also think that different methods are needed to study it.

In her foundational work, titled *A Very Serious Thing: Women's Humor and American Culture*, Nancy Walker (1988: 24) highlights how the canon severely lacks women's humorous writing because of women's limited social roles. As women have lacked power, they also have not been in the position to make fun of those who have had power over them, at least not in print. This, however, does not mean that the humour used by women is inherently different from men's (Walker 1985a: 106). Greenbaum (1997: 137) suggests that generalisations on humour cannot be based entirely on gender: "It would be irresponsible for me to conclude that female humour does such and such, and male humour the opposite, since it is obvious that gender lines, like other areas of cultural delineation such as race and class, will always be crossed". Given that humour is socially and culturally diverse, it would be counterproductive to analyse it purely on the basis of gender, without attention to other factors like education or race, to give but a few examples.

However, although humour cannot be gendered, its use can be, which is why many scholars discuss women's humour and feminist humour in their work. Caliskan (1995: 49) stresses how traditional humour often disregards women's contributions and is still mostly dominated by men. Women have been expected to identify with humour that targets or insults them, to conform to normative standards (Merrill 1988: 274). Walker (1988: 12) claims that the notion of women having to appear demure and passive contradicts the premises of humour

as the humorist assumes a superior position in their writing (Dadlez 2011: 12) and wit can be seen as the expression of confidence and power (Walker 1981: 6). Furthermore, as humour is associated with aggression and assertion, characteristics that are often seen as traditionally unfeminine, female wit is immediately challenged by societal expectations (Caliskan 1995: 52). Walker (1988: 9) also discusses what it meant for a woman to be a humorist in the past: “to be a woman and a humorist is to confront and subvert the very power that keeps women powerless, and at the same time to risk alienating those upon whom women are dependent for economic survival”.

Walker (1988: x) claims that women humorists were aware of the perception that women’s sense of humour was socially unthinkable and thus it was common to publish humorous texts under masculine pseudonyms (Walker 1988: 5). Walker (1988: xii) indicates that women writers used humour as a communicative device, as most of the readers of texts published by women were other women (Walker 1988: 29). Some scholars claim that women with more traditional gender role values are more likely to employ self-deprecating humour to relate to other women (Bunkers 1985: 85). However, it should not be assumed that all women writers employ self-deprecation in their witty writing (Levy 1997: 31).

Women’s humour, to make a very broad generalisation, is characterised by some distinct themes, for instance isolation or the desire to claim autonomy (Walker 1988: 4, 331). The isolation theme was not only used in the spatial sense, but also to depict women’s lack of access to personal achievements (Walker 1994: 332). Especially for suburban writers it was common to highlight the unfulfilling aspect of life in the countryside and the domestic roles women were expected to fill (Walker 1994: 341). Powell’s earlier novels also deal with suburban life, and often comment on the same issues. Walker (1988: 12) argues that although women followed some of the mainstream trends in humour, such as the shift that took place at the turn of the twentieth century from dialect humour into an urbane word play, they also

developed unique styles like the skit or the humorous fantasy. In addition, the texts often included subversive subtexts (Walker 1988: 30). In the case of political humour, the target was often the absurdity of limitations regarding gender-specific issues (Walker 1988: 12).

The cultural relationship between women, humour and feminism is multi-faceted (Kein 2015: 672). Although the term “feminist humour” somewhat overlaps with women’s humour, there are still notable distinctions (Fishkin 2011: 223). Some scholars agree that feminist humour is subversive by design, and its aim is to inspire change, instead of reinforcing stereotypes, which is often the baseline for humour in general (Fishkin 2011: 223). Stereotypes and sexist beliefs are still employed by feminist humour in order to call attention to and to challenge the stereotypes about men and women (Kaufman 1994: x; Bergman 1986: 74). Stereotype-based jokes can reach a wider audience, since they are broader in terms of subject matter than more political jokes that require familiarity with the specific context (Smuts 2010: 339). Walker (1985a: 118) claims that feminist humour tends to be more insistent than traditional women’s humour, although it still leans on the “enormous dichotomy between men’s and women’s experience”. In another foundational work, *Pulling Our Own Strings: Feminist Humor & Satire*, Kaufman and Blakely (1980) maintain that feminist humour is the humour of the oppressed. In contrast, Lisa Merrill (1988: 279) suggests that feminist humour is empowering and highlights the value of female experience. This take is similar to that of Janet Bing (2004), who argues that feminist humour can also be understood as a celebration of the female experience. Bing (2004: 27) maintains that it is important to establish feminist humour as not only disparaging, because it ends up ignoring women and their experiences. Bunkers (1985: 89) offers another take on how female humour differs from feminist humour:

Female humor, then, may be self-deprecatory, while feminist humor is sarcastic and assertive. Female humor turns inward, back on the joke-teller, while feminist humor turns outward, directing itself towards others, encouraging them to share a common disbelief in women’s powerlessness and to claim power by reclaiming the language and redefining its use.

Feminist humour can also be seen as a way to rehumanise and revitalise women (Bunkers 1985: 91). Kaufman (1994: xi) also acknowledges the existence of a grimmer or angrier feminist humour that addresses issues that cannot be or are difficult to change.

Despite the indications of women's humour and feminist humour remaining relatively obscure throughout literary history, there have been some collections and studies already from the nineteenth century. For instance, the 1885 collection titled *The Wit of Women* by Kate Sanborn highlighted female humorists of the time and was a result of the discussions in the New York periodical *The Critic* and *Good Literature* (Habegger 1982: 168-169). Possibly the very first scholarly experiments regarding feminist humour were conducted by Stillion and White (1987). Their three experiments, which used feminist slogans and cartoons, revealed that gender and feminist sympathy influence the reactions to feminist humour. Stillion and White (1987: 220) suggest that in order to appreciate feminist humour, one should be inclined to believe that women have been systematically oppressed by patriarchal society and a change is needed in relation to their status.

Scholars have also suggested strategies and techniques that are often employed in feminist humour, for example the stereotype, hyperbole, deflation and wit, used to express dissatisfaction with society (Walker 1994: 332). Fishkin (2011) has established three strategies of feminist humour: illumination, impersonation, and inversion. Illumination involves casting light on issues that are typically unvoiced, thus making the invisible visible (Fishkin 2011: 224). An example of this might be the belief that housework is not real work. For instance, writers such as Fanny Fern, Mary Kay Blakely, Helen Rowland and Erma Bombeck reveal the tedious aspects of housework, by explicitly saying what is usually only implied (Fishkin 2011: 230). Impersonation is often used to impersonate someone whose attitudes the writer wants their readers to reject, especially those who hold patriarchal attitudes (Fishkin 2011: 234). Inversion includes switching the roles of men and women and imagines what they might feel

as a result of having to inhabit the world of the other gender (Fishkin 2011: 239). Many writers, Alice Duer Miller and Mark Twain among them, have used this humorous strategy (Fishkin 2011: 241).

1.2. Satire And Feminist Satire

Satire, like humour, is difficult to define. Some scholars do not consider it a genre, but a mode, a technique or even an imitation of other genres (Weisgerber 1973; Griffin 1994; Knight 1992: 30). The terminological confusion might stem from the fact that historically, satire was supposed to follow specific rules and was used to denote the works written by ancient Greeks and Romans (Elliott 2025: para 6). Today, the term usually denotes “diffused satire”, to use a term coined by Kathryn Hume (2007). Many scholars agree that satire, in its very essence, is an attack directed at either a specific person or societal problems, acting as a vehicle for indirect critique (Hume 2007: 305; Greenberg 2011: 7; Knight 1992: 22; Dadlez 2011: 14). This is also the working definition of the given thesis.

Satire is characterised by the necessary presence of indirect criticism of the status quo, not only amusement (Caron 2021: 24). Unlike humour, satire does not require the element of laughter. In fact, most satires are not meant to be funny in the traditional sense at all (Griffin 1994: 4). Caron (2021: 24) considers the element of judgement the most important and playfulness as secondary to it. It is a means of covert protest, aiming to correct cultural imbalances (Walker 1988: 70). For example, it has been called humour’s most political subgenre, as it is able to deal with issues regarding power and politics (Gray et al 2009: 11).

Although morality has been considered one of the key characteristics of satire (Weisberger 1973: 159), its importance has decreased in contemporary satire (Griffin 1994: 185). The hints at possible solutions to issues that are depicted are brief, if they exist at all (Weisgerber 1973: 160). However, the potential for real-world impact comes from the dual nature of satire: it usually references actual issues or people using comic techniques and is

simultaneously serious and non-serious (Caron 2021: 22). This makes questioning societal practices more accessible.

One could conclude that satire as a genre is intentionally vague, as the author leaves it to the reader to decipher the hidden meanings and jabs (Weisgerber 1973: 162). Thus, a successful satire also presumes that the author and the reader have a mutual understanding (Knight 1992: 33). This could be achieved by establishing an analogy to make the reader critical towards the satire's target (Diehl 2013: 313). According to some scholars, the satire will be ineffective if the author merely expresses their own emotions and fails to gain the reader's agreement (Knight 1992: 32).

As satire offers the means to indirectly undermine the status quo, it can be particularly useful for marginalised groups, in the context of this thesis, women, in order to express opinions about contemporary events and situations without stating them outright. Like humour, satire has traditionally excluded women in any other role but as the target of criticism: "women have been standard objects of attack in satires since the classical era" (Hedrick 2014: 123).

There is limited scholarship on feminist satire, because it is often overshadowed by feminist humour. Still, there are female satirists who have merited academic research (Hedrick 2014: 123), for example Ursula Le Guin's *Left Hand of Darkness* (1969) and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* (1915) (Gilmore 2018: 153). There is also scholarship about feminist satire of the 1970s as an important tool of the evolving feminist politics of the time (Hedrick 2014). Walker (1994: 329) suggests that literary critics often fail to analyse the subtle satire of popular women writers who turned to novels in search of identities in a rapidly changing world.

Although some satires may be enjoyed as fictions without understanding the real-world target (Diehl 2013: 313), satire can still be particularly difficult to detect and misinterpretation is fairly common (Gilmore 2018: 138; Fife 2016: 323). A lot of the subject matter in satires is related to specific situations, period-related issues or certain people (Caron 2021: 31).

Furthermore, satirical statements usually intend to convey the exact opposite of what is depicted (Dadlez 2011: 7). The specific targets are always denied full individuality as they are reduced to recognisable archetypes (Eden 1987: 597). Self-deception or deceiving others is a central feature of satiric characters (Eden 1987: 594).

The reader should also be capable of at least some degree of self-reflection, as satire is meant to raise questions and create uncertainty (Hume 2007: 325). It requires the audience's awareness of what is being criticised, even regarding topics that have been normalised (Deer and Deer 1977: 714). Thus, it encourages critical thinking (McClennen and Maisel in Fife 2016: 325). It can also provide accessible perspectives to controversial issues and thereby reduce social tensions (Fife 2016: 322).

Satire employs techniques such as exaggeration, irony, incongruity, minimisation, parody and absurdity (Fife 2016: 326; Burke 2024: 107). Propp (2009: 64) identifies three basic forms of exaggeration: the caricature, the hyperbole, and the grotesque. A caricature is created when one detail, either physical or mental, is highlighted to the extreme, and made to seem as if it is the only important one (Propp 2009: 64). The hyperbole is a type of caricature, but instead of one feature, the whole of the object is criticised (Propp 2009: 65). In the grotesque, the exaggerated object is made to be horrible to the extreme (Propp 2009: 67). Irony is characterised by deception and contradiction (Hutchens 1960: 353). Some satirists use corrective irony, which means that readers are initially amused only to later feel embarrassment for laughing (Hutcheon 1992: 227). Incongruity denotes the gap between what is expected and what occurs (Propp 2009: 81). Dadlez (2011) discusses two humour theories, the superiority theory and incongruity theory, which can also be applied to satire. Superiority theory employs ridicule to enjoy one's perceived superiority to recognise the weaknesses of another (Dadlez 2011: 2). Incongruity theories pose a contradiction that breaks patterns, allowing people to consider perspectives they had not recognised before in an enjoyable manner (Dadlez 2011: 2).

Parody can be one of the strongest devices employed in social satire, as it can reveal an inner flaw in the person being parodied (Propp 2009: 60, 62). Draitser (1994: 101) stresses that a good satire is not boring, and rapid alternation through dialogue or differing syntactic types create a unique style. In tandem, Snyder (1991: 142) names talk as the core of the satiric style.

1.3. Powell And Satire

Dawn Powell is often compared to her contemporary Dorothy Parker. Given that there is more academic literature on Parker, indeed, there are parallels that are worth considering, as they might offer insight into Powell's work as well. Dorothy Parker employed satire to comment on changing gender codes of the time (Coulombe 2013: 45). Still, she ridiculed both men and women, usually for their weak-mindedness and it was done in a way that seeks to change gendered assumptions (Coulombe 2013: 46). Male characters are often depicted as vain and female characters are shown repeating the same mistakes (Coulombe 2013: 53). Parker offers satiric examples of behaviours to avoid by portraying complex characters in constraining situations, thus making gendered issues a focal point in her work (Coulombe 2013: 53). Parker's writing attempted to subvert the notion of love as a private matter (Miller 1992: 782). Coulombe (2013: 47) analyses creativity in Parker's female characters as an assertion of autonomy. The same can be said for one of Powell's female characters in *Angels on Toast*, Ebie Vane. Coulombe (2013: 56) also argues that the use of satire does not trivialise Parker's work, but rather encourages multi-layered readings and cultivates a gendered understanding that is still relevant today.

In *The Message of the City: Dawn Powell's New York Novels, 1925–1962* (2016) Patricia Palermo offers an overview of eight of Powell's novels, including her first novel, *Whither* (1925), and *Angels on Toast*, which she includes among the New York novels, although she maintains that it could also merit its own category, given that it is more of a hybrid

of a Chicago and a New York novel. Palermo (2016) uses Powell's diaries to contextualise and analyse the novels, maintaining that nearly all have an autobiographical component. She even claims that the novels are adaptations of diary entries (Palermo 2016: 110). Although Powell initially claimed that the characters in *Angels on Toast* had no real life inspiration, it is likely that one of the businessmen was based on her husband and the characters closest to him on the husband's circle of friends (Palermo 2016: 158).

Powell's satire often spanned across social classes (Fuchs-Abrams 2024: 140; Levy 1997: 22). For this reason, Fuchs-Abrams (2024: 142) has even called Powell's satire democratic. For instance, she aimed to show that the middle-class, the primary target audience of the sort of middlebrow fiction she specialised in, was not without issues, and she often criticised those who aimed to rise in status through immoral means (Tufel 2002: 159; Schwartz 2017: 167). Already from her first novel, Powell's satiric perception, ironic sense of humour and empathy toward her characters are present (Palermo 2016: 106; Lebowitz 2003: 232). She aimed to expose human weakness in all aspects of life, a trait of which became central to her writing (Levy 1997: 24). Tufel (2002: 157) claims that "the essence of Powell's vision was her acceptance of the imperfect human condition".

The topics of glamour and celebrity status in modern mass media are often criticised in Powell's satires (Keyser 2010: 110). For instance, *Turn, Magic Wheel* and *A Time to Be Born* depict female celebrities who struggle with their fame (Keyser 2010: 110-111). *A Time to Be Born* employs the impending war as a backdrop, and is somewhat darker than her previous novels (Palermo 2016: 168). Fuchs-Abrams (2024) conducted an extensive analysis on the use of satire in *Turn, Magic Wheel, The Wicked Pavilion* and *The Golden Spur*. These three novels are largely aimed at the art industry and bohemia, more specifically the way which artists turned into celebrities (Fuchs-Abrams 2024: 170). Fuchs-Abrams' (2024: 171) analysis reveals that Powell used female characters to discuss the paradox of modern love and the modern woman.

The paradox is revealed when it becomes clear that although the characters enjoy the new freedoms afforded to them, marriage still plays an important role in securing their futures (Fuchs-Abrams 2024: 171). Many of the texts about love in the period assumed that gender relations were inherently flawed (Miller 1992: 764). Irony is used to highlight misogynistic attitudes, such as double standards with regard to sexual freedom (Fuchs-Abrams 2024: 171).

Keyser's (2010) work covers *Turn, Magic Wheel, The Happy Island* and *A Time to Be Born* as they all inadvertently criticise mass media (Keyser 2010: 111). Keyser (2010: 111) argues that, by depicting characters who perform even small acts of defiance, Powell has employed humour in a way that subverts normative structures. In addition, Keyser (2010: 114, 138) identifies what she calls the Great Divide, the exaggerated archetypes of the "manly modernist", "feminine celebrity", "epicene male magazine writer" and male writers such as Ernest Hemingway as the chief targets of *Turn, Magic Wheel*. By highlighting those who she calls "he-man" writers, Powell criticises the gendered performance that is required in their fiction (Keyser 2010: 113). In *A Time to Be Born*, publishers Henry and Clare Boothe Luce and their publishing empire are the objects of Powell's satire (Keyser 2010: 132). Haytock's (2013) analysis of the novel reveals the complications that arise in the intersection of work and romance (Haytock 2013: 169). Haytock (2013: 174) argues that the gist of Powell's irony in that novel is revealed through the fact that, despite the superficial portrayals of romance and consumerism, women still have and employ strategies derived from the stereotypical view on women for their own benefit.

Powell was apt at depicting misunderstandings and the complexity of one's mind, for instance in *The Locusts Have No King* (Tufel 2002: 156). The novel is about the Algonquin lunch crowd and more widely criticises writers who prevent each other from living up to their fullest literary potential (Palermo 2016: 193). Tufel (2002: 156) also highlights *A Time to Be Born* and *The Wicked Pavilion* for their social commentary on how cultural institutions are

shaped by power. *Wicked Pavilion* is indirectly about Peggy Guggenheim and the dying cafe culture. *The Golden Spur* is similar in tone, the topics being aging, irrelevance and loss, as well as the way New York was changing as a city (Palermo 2016: 248). Powell's wit can also be seen in the ways she often portrays moments where one's daydreams or fantasies are interrupted (Tufel 2002: 161). For example, Powell presents a character's personal narration, only to include an outside force which presents the exact opposite of their own self perception (Tufel 2002: 161). Tufel (2002: 162) has even claimed that Powell's leitmotif is the depiction of people deluding themselves.

A common strategy among satirists, namely the simplification of characters in order to create a caricature, is a feature of Powell's writing that has often been criticised as her characters seem flat and underdeveloped and her plots have unambiguous endings (Fuchs-Abrams 2024: 142). This is especially true for Powell's female characters, who appear to have no happy endings, as they are generally depicted as having only two options, either settling in a small town with an oppressive husband or living an unhappy life in a big city (Levy 1997: 25). Palermo (2016: 43) also argues against critics who have called Powell's characters "unpleasant" and claims that they are simply unvarnished in their behaviour. Powell's characters have not lost their relevance, the way their inner worlds are described being as "current as this morning's news" (Palermo 2016: 270).

Powell's earlier work is tonally more sentimental, while the New York novels, among which *Angels on Toast* that is analysed in the present thesis belongs, express a sharper satire (Fuchs-Abrams 2024: 151). The latter novels were a means to express her discontent with the state of society, unattainable romantic ideals and consumerism. As most female satirists, Powell was similarly accused for being simultaneously overly caustic or not caustic enough, and her work often mixes self-deprecating humour with anger (Fuchs-Abrams 2024: 145). Still, Powell stands apart from other satirists in some ways: "her satiric writing is distinguished by a

sense of pathos and common humanity, even for those whom she targets” (Fuchs-Abrams 2024: 147). Her satire is often revealed through subtle insights (Levy 1997: 24). Levy (1997: 24) argues that Powell’s satire is sometimes overshadowed by the abundance of characters, some of which overlap across novels, which might confuse the reader. Covering a variety of Powell’s novels allows Palermo (2016) to make certain generalisations on Powell’s overall style and characterisations. For example, all New York novels seem to include a character leaving the small town for New York (Palermo 2016: 96). New York is identified as the central character in all the analysed novels (Palermo 2016: 125).

As could be seen from the above discussion, Powell’s New York novels are starting to get scholarly attention, although a lengthy study of the Ohio novels still needs to be done (Palermo 2016: 3). However, scholars have not taken a strictly gendered angle in analysing the novels and several novels are usually grouped together, instead of focalising a single one. *Angels on Toast* has not been discussed at length before, thus meriting closer analysis.

2 GENDERED SATIRE IN *ANGELS ON TOAST*

Angels on Toast is set in New York City and Chicago, offering dazzling descriptions of the business and social environments that serve as a background for the characters' conquests. The focal characters are Lou and Mary Donovan, Ebie Vane and Jay Oliver, whose struggles following the social norms are portrayed through satiric tools, for instance exaggeration and irony. The novel offers a glimpse into their lives and maintains a mostly linear plot. The third person narrative is prevalent throughout the novel. Although the narrator appears to hold some distance and does not always deliver explicit judgement regarding their actions, there are instances which might suggest that the narrator is female. This is revealed in the chapters where female characters are focalised, as their issues are often presented with nuance that implies the narration of another woman. Furthermore, Ebie Vane's character is often given lines which explicitly critique the specific actions of the male characters, which might hint that this might reflect the narrator's view. The novel's ending is ambivalent, as is common for satires.

Palermo (2016: 155) analyses the title thus:

Obviously the "angels" of the title is ironic; these two men are in fact the antithesis of angels, and they are quite removed from class. That they believe that the height of chic in restaurant dining is any dish followed by the words "on toast", likely a less sophisticated cousin of the French *en crouste*, underscores what to Powell is their midwestern naivete.

The phrase is first used by Lou:

'Anything you say, baby,' Jay said. 'You can have quails on toast just by lifting a finger.'
'That deal today is nothing,' Lou said. 'By the time we're through, old dear, we'll be buying you angels on toast'. (Powell 1940: 599).

Jay proceeds to request the dish from a waiter and thus the phrase is introduced as an absurd restaurant order. It describes the two main characters, who are obsessed with status and projecting their success to people around them. The imaginary dish sounds somewhat whimsical, but does not have any true meaning. It symbolises the superficiality of Lou and Jay. Blending the elements of something heavenly with the trivial, the dish essentially hints at the way something special is turned into a consumer item. Their wealth is performative in the sense that mere possessions are not enough and the spectacle that Jay makes of the order symbolises

empty glamor. It is used for a second time later on: “‘Don’t I get any caviar?’ Complained Francie reaching for the tray. Lou passed her the caviar canapes. ‘Angels on toast if you ask for them, sweetheart,’ he said easily. That was the way. Chin up. Always leave ‘em laughing” (Powell 1940: 660). Using the phrase again in a casual setting gives it a certain banal quality. In addition, his closing remarks hint again at the performative aspect of identities, further establishing the mood for the novel.

Angels on Toast consists of 23 chapters and only a few of these focalise women. In general women are portrayed through the perspectives of male characters and their descriptions of women are used to criticise gender relations. The thesis looks at the novel through a gendered lens, identifying the ways in which gender norms are represented and parodied. The following analysis is organised into two subsections: portrayal of men and women and satirisation of romantic ideals. These themes are considered as tools for the creation of gendered satire in the novel.

2.1. Methodology

The present thesis employs thematic analysis as its methodology. The first reading was conducted to identify overarching themes, taking notes about more specific themes related to gender (such as performance of gender and idealised romantic relationships). In addition, the specific narrative tools used in the novel, such as the narrative point of view, were also identified. The first reading concluded with the identification of the subcategories for the analysis: the depiction of men, women and romantic relationships. The second reading encompassed highlighting passages to be used as examples of the given themes. This was done simultaneously with the literature review, in order to find which satirical techniques should get attention in the empirical analysis in answering the research questions. The literature review took satire and its tools into consideration, in order to establish a working definition of gendered satire. It was hence decided that the techniques of exaggeration, irony and incongruity

in the novel would be considered as the means that help to show the different layers that appear in the depiction of gendered authority. After organising the textual evidence by the chosen categories, the first draft of the analysis was conducted with a focus on thematic elements. The next stage of analysis aimed to reveal how the use of perspective further helps to reveal problematic aspects of the status quo.

2.2. Portrayal of Men And Women

2.2.1. Men

Success, or at least being perceived as successful, is essential to Lou Donovan and Jay Oliver, in all facets of their lives. Through the satirical exaggeration with which attitudes towards clothing, friendship, personality and other notions are portrayed, the thesis argues that Powell delivers commentary that critiques performative societal behaviour. Gender performativity assumes that there is no “natural body”, as all bodies are gendered throughout their social existence (Salih 2002: 55). Salih (2002: 56) employs the wardrobe analogy to explain this notion that is central to the theories of Judith Butler: “One’s gender is performatively constituted in the same way that one’s choice of clothes is curtailed, perhaps even predetermined, by the society, context, economy, etc. within which one is situated”. However, the choice of gender styles is always limited (Salih 2002: 56). The normalised repetitions are what make the performance appear “natural” (Bergman 2011: 141) and “as individuals experience and participate in these ‘repeated acts’, they produce and are produced as compliant subjects in the maintenance of the normative fictions of gender (Bergman 2011: 148). Willett et al (2012: 230) emphasise that micropractises should not be overlooked in terms of maintaining power structures, as they normalise gender codes, which are upheld by individuals who perceive these practices as voluntary.

The examples concerning Lou especially reveal a carefully curated, marketable identity, the upkeep of which is finally deemed impossible. The novel opens with the two men

discussing everyday topics, namely the opening of Lou's new branch in New York and common associates. However, what arises from the very first pages is the obsession with keeping up appearances. One way that this is presented is through the discussion of clothing and its cost. For instance, Jay is very satisfied with the way his socks match his suit:

He sat down and kicked his shoes off. They lay on the floor jauntily toeing out, reddish brown, sleek, very much Jay Oliver. He crossed his stockinged feet on the seat opposite and viewed them complacently, marked the neat way the crimson clocks in the gray hose matched the herring-bone stripe in his blue suit. 'Paid four fifty for these socks,' he stated briefly. (Powell 1940: 559)

Jay's nonchalance is reflected in the description of his body language and manner ("complacently", "jauntily"), as well as the casual way he states the price. However, this apparent indifference is overshadowed by the specific clothing-related language, as well as the fact that a dollar in 1940 is equal to nearly 23 dollars in 2025 (Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis 2026). His person is likened to the shoes, indicating that his personality is expressed through clothing. The remark that his socks match his suit creates the understanding that every little detail has been considered, making his appearance carefully curated. This is shortly followed by Jay inquiring about Lou's shirt, which is revealed to have cost 18 dollars (Powell 1940: 559). These characters are wearing 100 dollar socks and 400 dollar shirts, in today's sense, meaning that they put considerable effort into constructing the image that they present to others. In this instance, they are also attempting to exhibit class literacy in their social mobility. In mentioning prices, they assume that identity is constructed through consumer purchases the main target of which is the others who are supposed to recognise and validate the other's efforts and accept them as members of their social circle.

Such behaviour becomes a pattern and emerges throughout the novel:

He whistled as he selected a gray tie with a small yellow dot, eight-fifty, a gray suit with the merest flicker of a darker stripe, one forty he paid for that suit, gray silk socks,— he looked all right, maybe a little tell-tale crinkling around the eyes, still he looked better than the run of men you'd meet. Nothing flashy, just quiet good taste. Mary had taught him that, she hated loud clothes, it was all he could do to sneak in an occasional pin-stripe. (Powell 1940: 634)

Lou elevates his own standing through comparing himself to other men. He also reveals that the way he dresses has been taught by his upper-class wife who has trained him to refrain from

too obvious displays. His good mood and apparent ease in building the appropriate outfit shows that the behaviour has likely been enforced through repetitive behaviour. “Quiet good taste” furthers the narrative that deductions regarding his person can be made through the clothes.

Another significant element of these repeated scenes is to draw attention to the fact that men, as much as women, are participating in the performative gender display through clothes and other consumer items. This display, the novel shows, is primarily targeted to other men, thereby revealing that not only women, but also men are appearance oriented and compete with each other in this respect.

Lou’s focus on appearances perseveres even as he discusses something as emotional as his wife’s infidelity:

‘.../ I saw my wife. I saw my wife’s room, too, with some guy’s fifty-cent necktie hanging up over the dresser, and a bottle of ten-cent-store hair grease in the bathroom, a lousy bottle of hair grease in my bathroom! Carnation Hair Oil! That was the kind of guy my wife picked to put her to bed! A five- and ten-cent store gigolo! (Powell 1940: 759).

His concentration on the external might suggest that he is hiding his true emotions behind anger, voicing them in the only way he knows. He is able to distance himself from the situation by insulting the man and his possessions, hinting that he resents the wife’s class slumming more than infidelity. Masculinity is revealed to be closely tied to social mobility and this achievement is shown to be fragile and in need of constant restatement. Simultaneously, he exposes his own feelings of inferiority regarding his past self when he, too, could not put together the appropriately classed public appearance. Throughout the novel, Lou mentions multiple times his disdain towards the poorer background that he came from and it is further revealed that he has tailored his appearance to match with the new version of him:

Next she’d ring in the stuff about his being pin boy at the bowling alley when he was a kid, all the stuff he wanted to forget—not because he was ashamed of it, hell, anybody might have to work their way up the ladder, but the days it brought back were so wretched, days of being kicked around, days when he was dumb, too, afraid to speak out, even, just remembering them gave him an inferiority. (Powell 1940: 654)

Now that he has been cheated on with a man who Lou perceives as lesser than himself in all regards, his illusions regarding his perceived superiority crumble. The unsustainable

performativity is contrasted with emotional reality, and his reaction to Mary's infidelity highlights the unstable nature of performative identities that fail to give people a sense of security about one's position in the hierarchy of other men. His view of success through a curated appearance is destabilised and this indicates that a persona built on marketable traits is unstable.

Lou and Jay are not the only ones to express concern regarding how they look:

The stranger's pale eyes moved suavely from the perfection of Lou's gray suit to the ravelling cuff of his own shirt, and he looked down at this cuff now with astonished concern. 'I must apologize for my shirt,' he said. 'My laundry did not arrive as I left the coast so I was obliged to borrow from the porter. Disgraceful looking. I hate that sort of thing. I like the best clothes, always have, always will. (Powell 1940: 570)

The stranger finds it important to clarify that his current appearance is not a true representation of him. Not only does he express his superiority by insulting someone beneath his status, but he also tries to elevate himself to Lou's level, to lessen the social breach between them. Although the fact that Lou used to work as a pin boy is revealed after the stranger's remark about the porter, it further cements the prevalent belief in the novel regarding instability of status. The superficial holds the utmost importance, as substance is visible to very few and deviating from expectations will result in failure in upholding the social hierarchy.

Concern regarding appearance goes beyond clothing, as Lou's internal monologue admits to his concerns about weight:

He had put on about 10 pounds in the last year, but there was something about a little extra weight that gave a man a certain authority, he thought. All right so long as it didn't get him in the middle and he'd have to watch it so that he didn't blow up like his old man had. One ninety was all right for five-eleven—he could carry it because of his big shoulders—but two hundred was the beginning of the end. Even this ten pounds made him a touch short of wind and made sitting around in his clothes uncomfortable." (Powell 1940: 559)

Authority is noted here as an important characteristic to a man. Weight is also something that can be carefully maintained and fashioned in order to create the ideal image of himself that projects authority, not a lack of discipline, here attributed to lower class bodies. Masculinity is presented as performative, requiring careful maintenance, not unlike the supposed vanity of women often ridiculed in a patriarchal society. This feminised concern is here projected to male

characters, to show that all gender is performative. Powell could be flipping the gender roles in order to highlight the absurdity of viewing vanity about appearance as a solely female characteristic. Attributing these characteristics to businessmen, figures who are usually associated with authority, does not only parody feminine-coded vanity. Rather, it could be a broader critique of these types of anxieties about one's appearance as a symbol of status as the product of societal structures. Since these descriptions come in the first chapter of the novel, they also suggest that not just the vanity and pretense that comes with striving towards the upper class life is going to be mocked, but also gendered double standards.

The obsession with appearance might also indicate a broader culture of commodification. For Lou and Jay, the detailed way they view clothing and prices becomes a parallel to their business practices, that is, the line between professional and personal is blurred. Their exaggerated attention to clothing thus critiques the pressures of society which equates success with the ability of presenting oneself as marketable. Presenting yourself a certain way becomes a transaction, as certain outcomes and benefits are expected by following social codes. One's appearance and identity become products, which can be tweaked and bettered in order to secure a better deal.

The appearances created through those one is associated with becomes evident, for instance by examining the friendship between Lou and Jay. The friendship is superficial, although this is not verbally expressed and they appear to be good friends, not only to outsiders but to themselves as well. Still, as Powell reveals in Lou's internal monologue, meaningful relationships are not important in the world the men inhabit in the novel. Friendship, usually understood in terms of authenticity and trust, is just a tool in a business career and social climbing:

Jay was all right, Jay was his best friend but a little bit of Jay went a long way. Lately, although their businesses were not the same, they seemed to be in everything together, and you can't have even a best friend knowing every damn move you make. Or was Jay his best friend? Jay was Whittleby Cotton and Whittleby Cotton was really his best friend. If Jay was ever eased out there his successor would be Lou's best friend. (Powell 1940: 560)

The first sentence is a contradiction in itself: “best friend” is said in a tone that can be read as irritation. In claiming that he can only tolerate Jay in controlled amounts, he indicates that the friendship is upheld for his own benefit. Success in business is more important and best friends, or rather human relations, are replaceable. Similarly to how Jay’s character was equated with his shoes earlier, he is now being seen as the extension of the company he works for, being thus reduced to an economic function. Powell satirises their friendship even further, describing an instance where Lou saves Jay from getting caught with his lover:

He was beginning to admire himself for the instinctive good sense he had shown in saving his friend’s face. He felt a little fonder of Jay (though still a little contemptuous) for permitting him to give this faultless exhibition of sterling male friendship. (Powell 1940: 573)

The previous descriptions of their friendship are anything but sterling. The adjective is an exaggeration in itself, especially when considered alongside earlier passages which highlight Lou’s self-interest. The saying “saving face” clearly states the importance of keeping up appearances. This situation provides Lou with the opportunity to act out an idealised version of masculinity, not out of sincerity, but societal expectations. This instance is an excellent representation of one of key themes in Powell’s writing – people deluding themselves. The superficiality of their relationship is also evident in the way that they do not seem to discuss any meaningful issues. The problems seem to be solved easily and without unnecessary talk: “Jay took a shower and borrowed one of Lou’s ties and they were pals again” (Powell 1940: 587). Avoidance is employed in order to retain the smooth exterior and emotional depth is sacrificed in favour of it. The triviality of their reconciliation shows that meaningful conversation is foregone. The tie could be seen as a parallel to their friendship or their performed identities. It is something that can be worn or discarded at will.

Despite the apparent acknowledgement of Lou as a good friend, Jay still seems to hold him in the same regard as other men, which could mean that he does not think of their connection as necessarily important:

Lou, though, was the regular fellow, a real friend, a pal, the man who saved him when he was on the spot. Well, the least he could do was to tip him off about what Flo and Judge Harrod had told Mary. In a way, though, he didn't see any real reason why Lou Donovan shouldn't get in a little hot water now and then. Other men did. (Powell 1940: 645)

By grouping Lou with other men, Jay shows that he does not view Lou as more important than them. The contradiction is thus present again, "a real friend" is followed by the casual normalisation of harm to Lou. Furthermore, there is also a passage that depicts Jay as enjoying Lou's embarrassment (Powell 1940: 660).

However, what really foregrounds the contradictions that have therefore been presented is one of Lou's lines towards the end of the book: "That was one thing about a pal like Jay, you didn't have to put up a front with him" (Powell 1940: 736). Taking previous passages into account, the line becomes ironic and a portrayal of self-delusion. The characters are unable to recognise the extent of their performativity and this dynamic thus becomes a critique of the loss of authentic human connection.

Performative relationships are not limited to friendship. Jay asks Lou what his wife thought of the opening of the new branch and Lou claims he did not feel the need to tell her at all (Powell 1940: 560). Information becomes a commodity and their lack of communication shows that the marriage is grounded in utility. Lou acknowledges the change that he underwent after marrying Mary, further implementing that he views his past and present selves as separate identities:

There was the matter of his ex-wife showing up in Chicago, old Fran whom he'd never expected to see again. As long as she hung around town there was the danger of Mary finding out he'd been married before. He was a close-mouthed man and after he and Fran broke up, so long as she seemed unlikely ever to bob up again, he saw no necessity for going into all that business with the new friends he made in Chicago. (Powell 1940: 561)

In this internal reflection, Lou reveals that his marriage to Mary is another facet of his life he wishes to have strict control over. He is not above lying to people close to him in order to uphold the front: "'I'm not lying to her,' he expostulated. 'I'm merely saving myself explanations, that's all. Explanations take time and I'm a very busy man'" (Powell 1940: 657). This also echoes Lou's business-oriented mindset, as time becomes a form of capital. Lying

surpasses the notion of failed morality and is perceived as a business strategy. His marriage to Mary is merely another indicator of success to him. Marriage is not based on affection but a means to establish one's position within a class structure. For instance, Jay identifies Mary as an "F.F.V." (Powell 1940: 564), which is the abbreviation for First Families of Virginia (Fishwick 1959: 147). Once Mary's uncle, Judge Harrod, is introduced, it becomes clear that Lou has married her to elevate his own status. He attempts to twist all relationships into his own benefit:

'Oh yes,' said Lou, reddening, for this was another matter that annoyed him, that Mary should be an integral part of the Harrods' social life except when he, Lou, was at home. He didn't really give a damn and, of course, Mary knew how musicales, contract, and formal dinners made him squirm, but he would have liked to have all his customers see him making himself at home in the Judge's pleasant garden, large Tom Collins glass in hand, the Judge's blue ribbon Scottie sleeping trustingly at his feet, the Judge's big shot friends—governors, bank presidents, bishops, all hanging on to Lou Donovan's sound analysis of business conditions. If such pictures could have been distributed without the actual boredom of listening to an evening of musical baloney or highbrow chit-chat, Lou would have been quite happy. But after half a dozen efforts of both Mary's side and the Judge's to include Mary's husband in the Harrod social life with nothing but embarrassment on all sides, the contact dropped back to a family matter between the Harrods and their favorite niece, Mary. Lou suspected that he was barely mentioned, even, during these family conclaves. He found he could make use of the connection conversationally without the bother of going through the actual meetings, and this suited him fine, except for the increasingly rude attitude of both Judge and Mrs. Harrod when they met him. (Powell 1940: 566)

This is another example of the way Powell builds up a character's daydream, only to have it collapse for a humorous effect (Tufel 2002: 161). He describes how he wishes to be seen in great detail, even the dog at his feet, no doubt meant to signify loyalty and excellence of character, has to be the best, being referred to as "blue ribbon". Through employing such specifics, he creates the idealised image. The inauthenticity of this vision is confirmed by Lou himself, as he wishes he could distribute this perception like a postcard to those whose validation he seeks. True immersion into these circles is secondary to him. The implications of the scene go beyond mere comic relief. The Harrods have seen through Lou's exterior, the fact that he does not care the slightest about the interests of the elite and thus does not actually belong to their social circle. Although Lou has acquired the physical markers of success, he is still unable to inhabit the scene. His only objective is to reap the benefits of what such connections offer him and thus he misses how the social connections operate. There is also the

constant desire to appear better than others: “Since the Judge, in spite of his superior fortune, was not a showy spender, it was fairly easy to get a bigger house. Next, he wanted a larger living-room, since the Judge prided himself on his large living-room, so Lou’s was two feet longer” (Powell 1940: 676). The passage leans into absurdity and material means are employed to establish his perceived superior standing over somebody whose class status is secure and does not require lavish display. This also highlights that his performed identity extends to his surroundings as well, not only appearance.

Fatherhood is another topic that merits discussion in the novel in regards to masculinity and performed identities. Lou’s thoughts regarding his daughter reveal his relative distance to her:

He occasionally surprised himself wishing he had a child of his own, and then he’d remember why he really had one, only it was Mary’s and he didn’t dare touch it. Some women took their children that way. It didn’t matter, really, and it filled her life all the time he was on the road. (Powell 1940: 584)

Having a child is not a desire for Lou, but rather a fleeting impulse. He views her almost as an object that does not belong to him. Fatherhood becomes another facet of his personality that he occupies only externally. Utility in relationships is emphasised again, as Lou also reduces the child to a tool which keeps Mary occupied. His superficial role is furthered as he considers who the child resembles, feeling that she is more a Harrod than a Donovan (Powell 1940: 679). The child, like Mary, becomes a class marker that simultaneously reminds Lou of his inability to truly belong. It is later revealed that with his ex-wife, Lou felt no desire to have a child: “If he could put two hundred down on a car he could afford to pay for a baby, that was always her argument. His line was that he couldn’t stand kids, they’d break up the marriage” (Powell 1940: 650). Having a child with someone of Mary’s status produces the narrative of a happy family, something that only furthers his image as a successful and accomplished man. He stresses this point further: “So now he was crazy about the little girl Mary had presented him with. What was wrong with that? Was it his fault he had human nature?” (Powell 1940: 650). This could be read as another instance of self-delusion, as he refuses to admit that his reasons for having

a child were in his own best interest. The phrase “presented with” is also telling, framing the child as a gift that he received, and not a person in whose conception he played a role and who he could forge a bond with. Later, Ebie Vane’s musing frames the novel’s wider take on fatherhood: “/.../there was even a father out wheeling a baby, a rare spectacle in Ebie’s life so she leaned out to see whether the pram really contained a baby or a publicity stunt” (Powell 1940: 602). Active fatherhood is not normalised in the context of the novel, hinting at wider societal norms according to which fathers have no active role in children’s lives and thus children become a sort of a status symbol, too, as a sign of a man’s respectability.

Tailoring one’s personality is another element of curated appearances present in the novel. Lou has crafted his persona carefully, even if he claims that his ministrations have been done almost subconsciously: “He remembered he had not told Rosenbaum about his wife’s connections yet, though he had mentioned them casually to the Mayor /.../ These little coincidences had been mentioned casually by Lou, that was all, but they had helped” (Powell 1940: 582). The word “casually” is ironic, because the passage reveals Lou’s practiced social behaviour in which hints about his status are dropped consciously and in a planned manner. In one instance where he intends to be amusing, he discloses information that exposes his affair. He uses a nickname for Rosenbaum that the woman he is having an affair with uses, thus exposing that they know each other, although he has previously claimed that he does not: “‘Call him Rosebush the way I do,’ Lou chuckled, but he ended his guffaw by clearing his throat for a sudden startled expression had come to Rosenbaum’s face” (Powell 1940: 640). The tone shifts as he is caught in a lie and his façade drops, unraveling one of the ways he has built up his persona: “Usually Lou jotted down any new gags in his notebook for future edification of clients, but today he only half-heard” (Powell 1940: 640). It affirms that Lou is using these jokes strategically, as a means of self-presentation and persuasion. He is disturbed enough to have a change in routine, which indicates that his identity has been somewhat undermined.

The act of making a drink could be read as a metaphor to his own persona:

Lou no longer cared what happened and left the soup course to go downstairs again and throw a few juleps together, not such a delicate operation when performed without an audience, chipped ice, a couple slugs of Bourbon in each glass and some mint poked around in it for a second. (Powell 1940: 685)

Earlier it is established that he chose the drink for its performative quality and he further confirms that the action becomes careless without spectators. Observation becomes more important than substance and this thus exposes the act's artificiality. He perceives his actions as significant only if there is an element of external validation.

Although keeping up appearances for others seems to be his chief concern, upholding the image to himself seems to be almost equally important. Even if there are factors indicating the contrary, Lou is often described as very satisfied with himself:

'I have a small office staff, sure, but I got investigators all over the world, people making maps, people shopping for equipment, people wangling social politics to clean up bad sections around a hotel, –they report to me. I keep a finger on everything, I'm the works". (Powell 1940: 593)

Even if external factors contradict it, Lou's internal monologue acts as a self-reinforcing mechanism. The delusion narrative is furthered, as Lou leans on personal recitation to uphold his confidence. This further cements the idea that identities of the characters are established through illusion. Therefore, he himself becomes the audience that needs convincing. He uses boisterous language to praise his own accomplishments:

Call it the town, call it maybe a little bit Lou Donovan knowing how to handle it, too. That was the kind of guy he was, big town stuff. Little things floored him, but give him a big problem, give him a big town, the biggest, and he could swing it with his hands tied. (Powell 1940: 633)

Personal matters seem to be what undermine his perceived control, meaning that he feels comfortable in patterns familiar to him, such as business relations, but is unable to navigate human connection. In tandem, he seems to be intent on upholding the illusion to himself, even as things are falling apart around him. For instance, he told himself to "ride it through" when he was caught cheating on his wife (Powell 1940: 689). Similarly, when he got cheated on himself, he thought: "Keep busy, that was the trick, keep doing something, if it was only drinking, till the old brain quieted down" (Powell 1940: 764). He uses avoidance as a means

of self-preservation, in order to uphold the curated façade. Furthermore, he is intent on justifying himself, which affirms one of the key points of the whole novel: “That was the way to look at it. Everybody was phoney, it made it better that way. The unbearable ache at the things he kept hearing about Trina was nothing but growing pains. You had to be a phoney to get anywhere in this world” (Powell 1940: 742). Inauthenticity is universalised, and he views his behaviour as part of the system. Still, the emotional language employed here (“unbearable ache” and “growing pains”) hint that the performance is strained, and is in hindsight impossible to upkeep.

There are some references that could indicate that Lou has changed his name, and he mentions it when talking about his connection to the Harrods’: “He, Lou, was just a sort of chauffeur, so far as they knew his name was Cassidy” (Powell 1940: 668). And once more: “The usual brushoff. Old Cassidy, the bellboy, mustn’t try to muscle in on the Harrods’ exclusive family affairs” (Powell 1940: 669). These indirect references to the name change further highlight the performative nature of identity, the attempt to rebrand himself in order to sever any ties with his past self to secure social mobility. The name Cassidy becomes synonymous with servitude and his past status. However, the novel ends with him possibly reclaiming the name and thus possibly a previous version of himself as well, when he indicates that an old acquaintance should refer to him as Cassidy (Powell 1940: 765). This possible reclamation complicates the narrative, leaving the ending ambiguous. Still, the act does not make his supposed change more authentic, but rather further emphasises that his identity is unstable.

The examples given help to construct a more or less unified theme but they also reveal how Powell employs exaggeration through repetition. The repeated instances make the exaggerated behaviour visible and thus open to criticism. Lou’s own behavioural patterns have been forged through repetition, showing how important such social roleplay is both in one’s

personal and professional life. Performative identities become a central theme in the novel, and the way they are gendered hint at wider societal critique regarding normative structures.

2.2.2. Women

In analysing American women writers' domestic humour of the 1940s and 1950s, Walker (1985a: 101) concludes that the central issue depicted is often the female protagonist's attempt to adhere to societal standards. This theme appears also in *Angels on Toast* in which female characters struggle to find balance between the private space, public career and personal relationships (Haytock 2013: 172). This is chiefly shown by employing contradiction in the characters' behaviour and thoughts. The examples analysed show that despite being at least distantly aware of dubious societal standards, the characters still attempt to follow them. It is indirectly hinted that the norms and those who impose them are at fault, not the characters.

Limiting female voices in the novel might be an indication of how women's problems often go unrecognised. The female characters who are given their own chapters are Ebie Vane and Mary Donovan who will thus be the main focus of this subsection. However, Trina Kameray, Flo Oliver, Honey and Ebie's mother will also be discussed. Walker (1985b: 108) claims that in many satires "women are either incredibly foolish and innocent or equally incredibly sensible". Both of these stereotypes are portrayed as troublesome to men in the novel analysed here. Although some of the female characters appear to manipulate the normative structures to their benefit, their efforts are undermined by male-centered social organisation.

Uncertainties about gender roles and domestic ideology was prevalent at the time the novel takes place (Neuhaus 2000: 471). While the "New Woman" of the 1920s was seen as a liberated and urbanised individual (Freedman 1974: 383), in the 1930s and 1940s popular portrayals glorified housewives and presented career women as undesirable (Freedman 1974: 383). Both types of women appear in *Angels on Toast*. Ebie is unmarried and used to have a

serious career in art, which she has thus cast aside in favour of Jay Oliver. Mary's personal interests are mentioned but she is often portrayed through her marriage and status.

Two chapters, one focusing on Ebie and the other on Mary, will be analysed in detail. There are parallels between these chapters which show that the issues they face, despite the different lives they lead, are similar. This shows how all female characters struggle to follow normative gendered behaviour. One such example includes the contradiction between Ebie's thoughts and actions:

A wife was a wife. She shouldn't flare up at Jay. The fault was her own for giving up her simple old life as a real artist—(work away at it even if it takes years! That's what she should have done)—and started distorting all the decent things in life with commercial art, married men, Rainbow Rooms. Hopping all over the country at a word from the man. Kicking her work over. Kicking over her ideals. (Powell 1940: 600)

Ebie, like Lou, mentions a different kind of past life. It happens once more in the same chapter: “‘My God, but I was bright then,’ she reflected now with astonishment, ‘I certainly threw away a good brain when I started up with Jay and Lou’s crowd.’ But of course it was her own fault, she knew that” (Powell 1940: 606). Blaming herself seems to be a common theme for Ebie: “‘.../your own fault if you bought the property. Your own fault, too, if you were fool enough to try to live in it and prove something or other about yourself that didn’t matter to anyone but you, and besides you got sick proving it” (Powell 1940: 745). In all instances, the blame appears to be tied to her choices regarding normativity. She regrets actions that are seen as traditionally unfeminine, for instance, owning real estate, which would allow her more autonomy, as she is not married. She has created a new self by allegedly forsaking her ideals. By suggesting that she is no longer as bright as she was in the past, she recognises the consequences of her choices. Mentioning Lou and Jay explicitly makes them representations of the male-oriented life she now leads. Belonging to “their crowd” has provided her with comforts, but she regrets that she is not creating “real art” or realising her full potential, which could only be achieved by living in an untraditional way. Thus, the contradiction between what one truly feels and what women feel they must do in order to be accepted in society is highlighted. This pattern is also revealed

when Ebie describes her car: “A little blue car is very becoming to a young woman as every young woman knows /.../” (Powell 1940: 602). The phrase stresses the absurdity of gendering objects and linking them to gender norms.

Both characters seem to be at least distantly aware of these patterns, as is shown in both of the inner monologues. At one point, Ebie muses:

‘My God, I really am getting selfish,’ she admitted, and then she decided this joy in the house to yourself was not selfishness but just pleasure in self-preservation, a New York characteristic. In a town full of people the New Yorker’s only haven was home, she thought, pleased at being so clever and philosophical with just her own thoughts, and then she wondered if that was what she really thought. That was another angle to her Sunday soliloquies, this thinking things then wondering if that was what she really thought or what she had made up her mind to think, and if so, what was she really thinking behind her thoughts. (Powell 1940: 596)

This passage is in a way similar to what was already shown about Lou. Cleverness and philosophy should be reserved for company in order to present a certain image. Thinking becomes a performance, not a tool for reflection. She also questions her own sincerity, revealing the paradox between the true self and the performed self. Spending time alone becomes a selfish act in Ebie’s mind, as she is not in some way pleasing some man. On the other hand, the phrase “thinking behind one’s thoughts” suggests at least some level of introspection. The introspection is somewhat destabilising and leads to fragmentation, given that she feels unable to trust her own thoughts. It suggests that external factors have influenced her thought patterns. Another quote stresses this point further: “Ebie reflected now that she had begun thinking life was a mess ever since she’d made up her mind not to be kidded any more about life or to kid herself about it, for that matter. So here she was, not knowing when she was kidding herself and when not /.../” (Powell 1940: 597). It can be read as another portrayal of delusion, although from a different angle. She is more self-aware than Lou, and “kidding herself” suggests that she is aware of her delusions. Authenticity and delusion become intermingled and impossible to separate.

A similar contemplation is revealed at the end of Mary’s chapter: “Already her head began to pound with its constant ache of thoughts, feelings repressed. Sometimes she thought

she would like to take off the top of her own head just to see what was really in it. All she was certain of was her own trained reactions” (Powell 1940: 675). She reaches this conclusion after she finds about Lou’s infidelity and realises she has deluded herself about her marriage. The wording, though is important here as it calls attention to women have to suppress their emotions, to play the role expected of them and that this takes effort. Like Ebie’s chapter, this too suggests that the male-dominated world around them does not provide the tools for self-discovery. Mary’s chapter begins with her considering going to a psychoanalyst, a thought she first quickly discards on account Lou’s reaction (Powell 1940: 671), but her imaginary consultation still reveals a lot:

Something was going queer in her mind, but the trouble was she was not having hallucinations, she was having facts. What could the doctors do about that? Well, doctor, she would say if she went to one of Them—(she always thought of the psychoanalysts as Them) I was perfectly normal for the first twenty-nine years of my life, I lived on a normal diet of hallucinations; an unusually intelligent and cultured upbringing enabled me to conduct my life decently blindfolded, but lately my mind seems to be shaking. Doctor, I think I’m going sane” (Powell 1940: 671).

Describing the psychoanalysts in the plural could symbolise patriarchy in general, an all-encompassing structure which has thus far directed her life and kept her locked in gender norms, blinded by her upbringing and class. She calls the norms hallucinations that have prevented her from grasping the reality that she now sees. The medical institution views women who do not conform to gender norms mentally ill, but Mary comes to the conclusions that now, finally, she is sane as she has lost the delusions. “Them” is capitalised, which could indicate authority and distance. This also implies that although psychoanalysis holds the promise of further insight, it is limited to repeating the norms of the society that ignores women’s needs. Living on a “diet of hallucinations” implies the existence of a kind of collective illusion, which is sustained through repeated behaviour. The imagined answer from the psychoanalyst reveals how women’s needs are belittled:

You’re tired, perhaps, you’ve been worried about your child’s illness, that mastoid operation, natural, perfectly natural, you’ve overdone your music, gotten yourself in an emotional stage about it, that’s all. These Truths, which you describe as disturbing your night dreams and your day thoughts, will soon pass. Why not go to New York on a shopping binge?—forget yourself, don’t think about your husband for a

few days, don't wonder about these problems; I'll guarantee you'll be your happy smiling insane self in no time" (Powell 1940: 671).

Mary's concerns are dismissed and partly attributed to her stepping outside of the wifely devotion by engaging in music. Instead of providing meaningful advice on how to deal with infidelity, she is told to go shopping. Introspection is cast aside in favour of consumption. The problems are found in the woman's intellectual interests, not the husband's infidelity and the constraints of gender norms. The latter are stressed by calling attention to the woman's duty to maintain a happy façade for others. The capitalised "Truths" that are deemed daydreams further suggest that true autonomy remains unreachable in this context. The scene is extended by working through a list of other medical professionals who might fix her issues:

Perhaps it was a surgeon she should consult. Surgeon, she would say, how long would I have to be in the hospital for a minor mental operation? How serious is it to cut out that little section behind the brow that separates what a Nice Girl Sees and Hears from What Really Happens?" (Powell 1940: 673).

This scene takes satire to an ever higher level as an over the top intervention is suggested to help a woman retain her docile acceptance of patriarchal double standards. By wishing the removal of her understanding of the world, Mary seems to desire to perceive the world without it being distorted by gender norms, but the wording indicates despair about pervasiveness of gender norms and the effort it takes to conform to them. Given the time the novel was published, it is plausible that the operation referred to could be a lobotomy. Before the 1940s, stories on lobotomies usually concerned women who, after the surgery, began to exhibit behaviour that was in accordance with conventional gender norms (Johnson 2014: 44). Gender conformity is more important than women's autonomy. Capitalisation is employed in the quote, and there is another instance of it in Ebie's chapter ("The Show Must Go On") (Powell 1940: 601). This technique makes the phrases stand out, like a wake-up call. Both indicate the female characters' awareness of the problems they are tackling, but are unable to escape. Portrayals of both Mary and Ebie can be read as ironic. Although Mary expresses awareness of the harmful aspects of the social norms, she does not attempt to subvert them, but rather calls attention to

tools that would increase her levels of conformity. Ebie, too, acknowledges the issues but her passivity makes her complacent.

One topic that Powell often discussed was the decline of hotel and café culture in the late 1950s and 1960s (Fuchs-Abrams 2024: 150). Traditionally, cafés symbolise connection, and they offered respectable and safe spaces for widows, single working women, and divorcees (Fuchs-Abrams 2024: 150). Powell sets some scenes in these locations:

It was after twelve, the hour when the bar opened on Sundays, and the elderly lady residents of the hotel were without too much obvious haste taking their places in the grill-room, nodding and smiling to the waitresses, carrying their knitting and a slender volume of some English bard, anything to prop against their first Manhattan. If you ever had asked yourself ‘What ever became of that famous old suffragette who chained herself to the San Francisco courthouse? What ever became of that lawyer who saved Killer Mackay? What ever became of the girl who survived Niagara Falls? What became of the author whose one book sold so many million copies he never wrote again? What became of the first wives of these now famous men?’ the answer would be—‘Look at the BAR and GRILL.’ Here they dwell, as remote from life as if they were in Bali. (Powell 1940: 607)

The café becomes a space that is occupied by women who once held positions of distinction, but are now somewhat cast aside. Although women are visible in this particular space, they remain somewhat disconnected from the wider public sphere. Yet, cafés also become locations where women could exert some autonomy. Ebie’s mother is an embodiment of this possibility, as she is shown discussing people’s indifference to Emily Dickinson’s poetry, hinting at her intellectual interests, not gossip and other trivial things women are often associated with (Powell 1940: 750). She is also described as emphasising the importance of independence: “‘/.../Personally, a woman of my intelligence has to be right here in the center of things, looking after my affairs. /.../’” (Powell 1940: 757). Through asserting her desire of being “in the center of things”, she indirectly subverts the traditional view of women occupying marginal positions. Ebie’s mother is also portrayed as ignoring traditional visual markers of femininity. For example, she refuses to soften her look: “‘Why don’t you have it brown, mom?’ she suggested, ‘it’s more softening. I mean, if you must dye it.’ ‘What do I want to look softened for?’ irritably asked her mother” (Powell 1940: 628). Ebie’s mother refuses to adhere to standards, which require women to appear subdued. However, it becomes clear that in the

context of the novel, the mother is not popular with other women and needs Ebie to make herself more acceptable:

No good deed of hers was ever more appreciated than this simple appearance at the table, for her natty plaid suit and simple good looks gave point to her mother's endless anecdote as well as excuse to her mother's mere existence, something the group she was now entertaining had doubted could be done. (Powell 1940: 609)

This quotation also emphasises the importance of appearances, as being seen with someone who appears put together and attractive becomes more important than the point of someone's discussion. Powell exaggerates the point further by contrasting Ebie and her mother, showing that someone who is not following societal rules exists on the margins of society and does not become equal to men. The mother's subversion does not afford her full autonomy but makes her isolated in a different way.

Although there are other instances of female agency, it is still portrayed as ambiguous in the novel. Ebie muses about her art, something that could otherwise symbolise autonomy, but the language she uses indicates something else: ".../though her gift for prostituting her art had always made those old companions strangely jealous" (Powell 1940: 600). The same view is expressed by Ebie's mother: "'Ebie's throwing herself away,' she said. 'She doesn't make a cent—just paints around the place. Then she cries. Absolutely ridiculous. I can't be around people crying, I told her. No go. I have my own life to live'" (Powell 1940: 757). This take also equates productivity with agency. Giving up pure art for commerce is compared to sexual commerce, suggesting that by successfully marketing her work, Ebie is degrading herself. This might indicate resentment towards her autonomy, achieved through her ability to earn an income. Ebie herself also has conflicted feelings about her work:

And here was she, Ebie, smart girl, for ten years chasing after a man who was pure poison to her career, to any career, made her business success seem silly because he was all she wanted, made this whim of hers for a farm a permanent cage for herself because it suddenly struck him just right. (Powell 1940: 747)

“Pure poison” indicates that she feels constrained in the life she leads and at times yearns for a marriage, as women of the time were supposed to. The language of the quotation, however, indicates that marriage is constraining for women as it is described as a cage.

Yet Mary also asserts her bodily autonomy: “/.../no intimate fumbling over her body, which after all was her own, and no reason why marriage in spite of its implicit obligations should give the lover complete and outright ownership to it” (Powell 1940: 714). The language here is telling, as marriage is described as the obligation to give up the control over one’s body. The use of “after all” implies that this take is perceived by the character to be unconventional and not a definite guarantee.

Trina Kameran, the woman Lou eventually leaves his wife for, is another relatively important character from the novel. She is described either from Ebie’s viewpoint, or that of the male characters. Thus her inner thoughts are not explicitly revealed. The analysis of Ebie and Mary above shows how women struggle with societal norms. However, this does not apply to all women characters. Trina is a war immigrant and it is made rather blatant that she wishes to secure her safety through marriage. She puts on an exaggerated accent throughout the novel, which she later drops, revealing that it was fake. In addition, she displays submissive traits in order to be more appealing. For example, Lou observes her thus:

/.../she never permitted her eyes to roam, and lowered them rebukingly when some crass stranger tried to stare her down. Her modesty and seeming fear of masculine attack gave an added piquancy to her merely average good looks, so that Lou was frequently disturbed by finding that her appeal was so general (Powell 1940: 722).

Her general appeal reveals that she has successfully employed this performed identity to work to her benefit in the world of the novel. Submission is valued and although the “fear” and “modesty” might not be authentic, they make her seem like a woman who needs protection and thus manipulates men into helping her. Although Trina is eventually successful in having Lou marry her, she is reinforcing the system that constrains her.

Another character who seems to manipulate the norms to her benefit is Flo Oliver, whose target is monetary gain. At first, she uses her husband's infidelity to receive compensation: "She never found anything she didn't want to, though, she knew when to play dumb and and get a booby prize of a new car or bracelet" (Powell 1940: 564). While the gifts are ironically called the booby prize, Flo is not the stupid loser here, but successfully manipulates her husband, with no active resistance. The narrative is complicated when during her and Jay's divorce it is revealed that she has been managing property by herself and has become independently wealthy. Therefore, her character shows that the appearances and actual actions do not coincide and that women who are usually viewed as passive and innocent, are able to use this false impression to get things done and to expand autonomy.

Other minor characters worth mentioning are Honey, Ebie's friend from adolescence and Francie, Lou's ex-wife. Francie plays a bigger role in the plot, hindering Lou's future plans and asking for money. The satire is based on Lou's dependence on his ex-wife who can threaten to expose his past and hence she indirectly controls the man:

He put three tens on the table. Francie looked at it a minute without touching it, then suddenly brushed it on the floor and stamped on it. 'Say!' he blazed at her. He was so surprised and indignant that he could say no more. Just as unexpectedly Francie the next moment bent over and picked up the three bills /.../ 'Even if it was only a penny,' Francie said wearily, 'I'd have to end up scrambling for it'. (Powell 1940: 659)

Francie is seen as asking money from her ex-husband several times in the novel, while she is already in a relationship with someone else. Her new partner makes money by gambling. He is not successful and Francie is seeking out alternative ways. The quote suggests broader commentary on women's economic vulnerability and their need to use indirect means to get by.

Honey is mentioned once in one of Ebie's chapters, seemingly in passing. However, the way her character is constructed in a few simple strokes expresses another facet of normativity that is taken to the extreme in order to emphasise its absurdity:

Honey was a virgin (at least you couldn't prove that she wasn't), and was proud as punch of it. You would have thought it was something that had been in the family for generations so that no matter what the circumstances she could never quite bring herself to hock it. (Powell 1940: 603)

A jab is made against transactionality, which will be discussed in the next subsection which deals with idealised romantic relationships. However, in this case, the suggestion that virginity is something akin to a family heirloom that could fetch a hefty sum from the highest bidder indicates both the value that is placed upon virginity, but also ironically indicates that one is pure if nobody can prove otherwise. The loud protestations of the character do not necessarily persuade the reader about Honey's virginity, but only the performance of virginity.

The way women are portrayed through the male characters show objectification and the notion that women only have value in connection to men: "Can I help it if I like high-class women? He asks. 'I like a looker, sure, but I like a little class to them, a little intelligence. To me it's no fun unless the woman has a little intelligence'" (Powell 1940: 590). Here, the women's intelligence exists for the pleasure of the man and she is not viewed as an independent adult, but more like an amusing pet. Intellect does not hold inherent value, but is treated like an accessory. Lou especially seems to despise women and their feelings, as soon as they are an inconvenience to him: "You'd think women would get over a thing after a while, but no, by God, they hang on to every damn thing in their lives, hoard every little ancient romance as if it was a Liberty Bond" (Powell 1940: 656). Women are portrayed as overly sentimental and their emotional experiences trivialised. He also accuses his wife as being unable to have fun: ".../ she was taking a couple of aspirin with it to help endure the pain of having a good time" (Powell 1940: 697). He reveals the double standard regarding societal expectations of women. Mary's discomfort is viewed as a personal failing and not a result of the environment she has been placed into. Lou's attitude towards women is revealed by his use of the word "piquant" in relation to women, to stress that women are to be consumed and have to make themselves palatable to men. However, the double standards regarding women are highlighted as well, for instance when one man discusses the women he hires: "I hire these girls for their sex appeal

but I'll be god-damned if I'm going to let them use it,' he said" (Powell 1940: 637). Women have to have sex appeal to please men, but only if this appeal does not give them too much power or freedom.

2.3. Satirisation of Romantic Ideals

The beginning of the twentieth century gave rise to different standards of love and dating (Stearns and Knapp 1993: 775). Marital advice articles of the time advocate love as the primary means of self-fulfillment (Cancian and Gordon 1988: 308). The romantic relationships portrayed in the novel, however, appear to be dysfunctional at best. The relations between men and women are often transactional and not based on affection or respect. Emotional connection becomes secondary to power and convenience.

The institution of marriage is the most ironically represented type of relationship. The male protagonists see no issue with their disloyalty and the wives seem to accept it as fact at least on surface. Some women have even learned to use male weakness to benefit themselves. Thus, marriage is portrayed as a social contract rather than a sincere bond. Ebie Vane is the only character who seems to openly criticise the male characters' double standards but, as Jay's lover, still simultaneously helps to maintain these problematic standards. This emphasises the difficulty of escaping established gender dynamics. The following subsection will discuss examples from the novel that show how marriage functions as a social performance. Some characters use it to their benefit, while others feel trapped or burdened by the emotional work it requires. Marriage as a performance fits into the broader context of the novel regarding social facades.

Jay Oliver is portrayed as feeling some guilt about his disloyalty to his wife. He uses financial means to quell this guilt: "Jay figured that if he buttered up his wife before every trip and brought her a present afterward it gave him his freedom" (Powell 1940: 562). Not only does this show that the character substitutes genuine affection with money, he also views

marriage as a constraint. Thus, marriage becomes a transactional exchange. Lou Donovan uses monetary means as well, in a similar way: “‘/.../ Take me. I drop in the Spinning Top, pick up Tessie or Fifi, slip them a fifty-dollar bill and that’s the end of it. I can meet them on the street with my wife, they never bat an eye’” (Powell 1940: 589). Both of them are essentially buying silence and acceptance on the woman’s part, creating an imbalanced gendered power dynamic.

These arrangements seem normal to the men: “Lou used to run around but since he’s been married to Mary he kept out of trouble, still doing what he liked when he liked but out-of-the-way sectors and on a strictly casual basis” (Powell 1940: 564). He places himself on a somewhat higher level than Jay by claiming that he is being clever about his affairs and they are temporary. The sentence, though, indicates that before his present marriage he, too, seems to have had steady mistresses. The fact that casual affairs are not seen as cheating is telling in itself. Morality becomes performative, as such arrangements allow the male characters to retain a sense of respectability while they continue to take advantage of women.

Cheating is normalised for men and the acceptance is highlighted by both male and female characters: “‘There’s a dozen Ebies in every block. Nobody has to have just one particular dame, you know that’” (Powell 1940: 703). There is another similar instance: “‘You’re too big a man to be tied to one woman’” (Powell 1940: 691). These quotes make women interchangeable objects and devalue loyalty, as something that potentially makes a man weak. The same dynamic appears in other examples as well: “Ebie didn’t see why Jay didn’t send his wife to Mexico for the fall and Florida for winter like other men did. Then you knew where they were and could relax” (Powell 1940: 577). Physical distance is employed as a means of continuous deception and this behaviour is presented as a rational and normalised arrangement. Governing the wives’ movements restricts their autonomy, but this is presented as if women were to be blamed for restricting men’s freedom. For instance, Jay complains about his wife’s behaviour, although he has set up the system himself: “If it was anybody but

a wife it would be blackmail, because she never comes right out and accuses me, she just sort of hints until I give her a check to shut her up” (Powell 1940: 589). He frames himself as the victim, engaging in self-delusion in order to preserve his self-image. After Lou is involved with Ebie, he thinks: “He had figured out Ebie as good enough sport not to regard last night as anything but a momentary lapse, but he might be mistaken. Sometimes these girls that talked like such good sports were more trouble than the other kind” (Powell 1940: 583). In this case, all of the focus is essentially put on the woman. It does not matter that he has been an active participant in the act of adultery and only feels concern now that he might be outed by the woman. As Lou reminisces about his day, he reaches an interesting conclusion:

Taking a shower, Lou thought how well things had gone for him that day. He clinched a swell suite of offices on Fifth Avenue in the Fifties, he’d lunched with and made a good impression on one of the biggest hotel men in the country, he’d started a whale of an idea on a kind of hotel survey, and so far as he was concerned, he was J. P. Morgan. He often in the past had dated up a red-headed hostess in a near-by nightclub but tonight he felt more like bragging than he felt like sex, so the date with Ebie was okay. There was no attraction there so it made it sort of homelike. (Powell 1940: 574)

He insinuates that he is not particularly attracted to his wife, further affirming that he has married her for personal gain. This is only made more explicit as the novel progresses: “He had gotten over his disturbance over her strange behaviour at parting and in the exultation of his unexpected good fortune today remembered only how proud he was of his high-bred wife and the excellent way their marriage was conducted” (Powell 1940: 582). “Conducted” frames the arrangement in business terms. The phrase “high-bred” likens his wife to a prized horse, a status symbol, not an equal partner.

The only times that Lou seems to be happy with Mary are the instances where she proves useful to him: “He suddenly felt safe again and it was all because of Mary” (Powell 1940: 665). Lou views Mary as a stabilising force in his life. For him she exists to make his life more convenient. In another instance, he thinks: “The thing he admired most in her and counted on the most for his own happiness was her reserve. He never had to listen to what went on in her little mind, and she never asked him what went on in his. If she cried about little

things now and then, and he supposed she did, he did not know what it was and certainly did not want to find out” (Powell 1940: 677). The woman’s submission is desirable and her thoughts and feelings are dismissed as something that a man can and should ignore. He puts no effort into understanding her and sees this as a positive aspect of their relationship: “He and Mary, thank God, could misunderstand each other and never have to speak of it” (Powell 1940: 690). Miscommunication becomes a strategy which helps to maintain the performative marriage. In cases where he tries to console her, he still focuses on himself and not her: “It reminded Lou they were not on warm terms, so he tried to think of something personal to tell her, the sort of thing he seldom told her but which she loved to hear” (Powell 1940: 584). Intimate gestures are reduced to tools which aid maintaining their relationship and not acts which bring two people closer. In some instances, he blatantly admits that he does not care for her wellbeing: “Lou could tell by the lift of Mary’s head and the cool look in her eyes that she was hanging on to herself, she hated the place, the noise, the gaudiness, the company she was in. But he was not sympathetic” (Powell 1940: 693).

The expectations placed on Mary, however, are different: “She tried to do what the doctor had suggested, to think of the man’s side, to realize that it is as sad to stop loving as it is to stop being loved” (Powell 1940: 715). As indicated above, the medical advice of the time blames women for marital difficulties and makes them responsible for the success of the relationship. There is another similar instance: “Your lives, said the analyst to Mary Donovan, are drifting apart, it is up to you to join them again. Make an effort, he said, to draw your husband into your life, above all do not show him you can have a perfectly pleasant life without him /.../” (Powell 1940: 705). She must limit her own autonomy to preserve her marriage. The emotional labor of fixing their marriage is exclusively Mary’s:

The psychoanalyst—as she had justly feared—had done nothing to give her the simple everyday courage to make a scene. He had done nothing for her with this suggestion to draw Lou into her family’s life. And when she had told him, with bursting temples and trembling hands, about the unmistakable evidence

of another woman in her very bed during her Southwestern trip, the stupid man had merely given her sedatives, and told her such a tiny catastrophe was not the end of the world. (Powell 1940: 713)

The quote shows the level of Mary's distress and anger at the medical professionals, increased by their consistent dismissal of women's concerns. Instead of telling her how to challenge the husband, she is sedated. She is doing her best to understand her husband, but is not given the same courtesy: "Mary looked at Lou, then at these women he knew and it seemed to her her head would split with the din and the strangeness of this side of his life, the effort of understanding him" (Powell 1940: 699).

In addition, it becomes clear that he views their relationship as a conquest on his part and Mary is a prize that he has won, objectifying her: "Whenever he heard Mary's cool agreeable voice on the telephone he had an exultant pride in having won her" (Powell 1940: 668). He even lists her positive traits, all beneficial to him:

Another thing that had won Lou, besides her good breeding, her name, and her discreet passivity, a quality he'd never found in any other woman, was her youth. She was twelve years younger than he and it seemed to give an added piquant flavor to the conquest, as if her youth was a rare diamond that he was able to buy and show off. He spoke of her youth oftener than necessary because, to tell the truth, she seemed older than himself with her restraint and dignity, qualities he was still struggling to master. (Powell 1940: 677)

Her perceived assets are something that enhances Lou's self-image and position. However, he does admit that he does not hold all the power in the relationship:

One thing he had guessed—was that here was a woman he would never tire of, because there was not enough of her to tire of /.../ That pale virginal quality would remain, and even after he had slept with her for six years—a not too satisfactory business because he was still afraid of her—he never felt that he had really made the complete conquest. (Powell 1940: 678)

The "incomplete conquest" introduces a tension which shows that Mary's emotional unavailability keeps him from gaining full control. In addition, the name "Mary", which can symbolise purity, reflects the very quality Lou covets. Names constituting a characterisation is not uncommon in satire (Draitser 1994: 145). This cements her as the novel's symbol of traditional femininity.

Ebie Vane's take on both Lou and Jay, as well the marital institution, seems to shed the most light on how the system actually functions:

Not that Ebie wanted marriage. She'd had chances enough but where would she get off, marrying somebody and then scrambling out every time Jay Oliver called up? Still she'd like a little affection, she thought with a modest dab at her eyes with her kerchief, maybe you didn't want a husband or a mother or a father or a child or a dog but you did have to have something. You did really have a right to have something belonging to you, something you could kick around and say, now that, that is definitely mine and nobody else's, and nobody has the right to kick it around but me, and that's security. (Powell 1940: 597)

The relationship described here is not an equal one, as it presumes that one always exerts power over the other. Her possessive logic highlights how the power dynamics are internalised by the female characters. Later, Ebie also says: "Girls don't have to be getting married every minute. Times are different" (Powell 1940: 630). Although her words highlight the changing norms, the wider context of the novel still emphasises how the options remain limited. The perceived freedoms and options cannot truly be realised within the existing structures. Ebie also explicitly states marriage as something that is fake:

No, nothing to prevent her picking up her old life, she could always go back to it, just as Jay and Lou could always go back to their wives. Jay and Lou with their big respect for marriage. Doing anything they pleased on the side but keeping up the great marriage front. The Show Must Go On" (Powell 1940: 601)

Even though the marital institution is revered in words, this does not mean faithfulness. Instead, everybody seems to participate in collective pretense. Ebie is sometimes shown as sympathetic to the wives: "Sometimes wives did get hold of a gun and the first thing they wanted to do was shoot down all the other women, never the guy that needed shooting" (Powell 1940: 625). This instance shows how patriarchal structures enforce the narrative of women directing their anger at other women and not the cheating husbands. Ebie, however, also admits that "After all, you can't blame the wives—it's not their fault they're always getting left at home," (Powell 1940: 588). This quote reveals the limitations placed on women who are isolated at home while their husbands have the social mobility to cheat. Ebie, in the context of these double standards, views wives' potential violence as justified.

Jay is contradictory in his attitude towards Ebie: “‘Marry Ebie? Listen, you can’t marry a woman that makes love as well as Ebie” (Powell 1940: 565). This quote indicates that there are women who are suitable for marriage and those who are not, indicating that both roles cannot be simultaneous. Later, when he considers marrying Ebie, he claims: “‘I hope marrying Ebie won’t spoil things,’ Jay mediated, frowning. ‘I kinda hate to get hooked again. This way suits me, but you know women’” (Powell 1940: 763). He is focused on what arrangement best suits his needs, framing marriage as a matter of convenience once again.

Ebie’s view on relationships and marriage is revealed even further: “Here was Jay, all set to marry her as soon as he got his divorce, and also all set for her to forgive him legally the rest of his life. Any fool could see that was no improvement over their old situation, so far as she was concerned” (Powell 1940: 747). This quote might suggest that the marital institution does not benefit women. Legitimising the gendered dynamics enforces them further. In addition, similarly to Mary, Ebie is described as having to simply understand her partner: “If Lou was with him they had some girls, too, those two never wasted their time running around alone. Jay would tell her all about it, they would laugh together about it later, and he would say how well she understood him. Well, she had to” (Powell 1940: 747). This furthers the narrative of women’s emotional labor the aim of which is make men feel better about themselves. The phrase “had to” implies that there might be no other choice.

“That was all everybody fought for, worked for, demanded as their right—traps” (Powell 1940: 747). This quote might suggest that all the goals that are deemed desirable in society, for example romantic relationships, are characterised by double standards. The “Traps” parallel can be viewed as a more general undercurrent of the novel. All the characters feel constrained by society, although submitting to patriarchal standards manifests in different ways, for example by being complacent in narratives that are harmful.

CONCLUSION

This thesis analyses how the satiric tools of exaggeration, irony and incongruity are employed to critique gender roles and power structures within the 1930s Manhattan circles that are portrayed in Dawn Powell's *Angels on Toast*, an under-researched novel from the period.

The introduction offered a brief introduction of Dawn Powell and the novel, to place her in the literary context of her time. The overview of previous scholarship on Powell as a magazine writer revealed that challenging gender performative messages is not uncommon in her body of work. The satirical realism that she employed in her work set her apart from the main literary movements of the time. The tools she employed allowed her to consider topics such as social performance, gender and urban life.

The literature review discussed the genres of humour and satire, including the way they have been gendered. The overview showed the wider discourse around the gendering of the genres. This, in turn, guided the choice of the techniques that would later be employed in the empirical analysis. It was established that satire and humour surpass entertainment and rather offer valuable insight into a culture's values, beliefs and attitudes. Although not all scholars identify amusement as a necessary indicator of satire, other maintain that entertainment offers the means to present critique in a way that is accessible to the audience. This is done by employing different satirical techniques, for instance exaggeration, which brings attention to problematic behaviour by amplifying it. Previous scholarship on Powell's novels was reviewed to establish common themes in her work, especially with regard to the use of satire and to identify the gap that the thesis would fill. The topic choice was made on the account of there being no prior gendered analysis on *Angels on Toast*. The methodology section showed how thematic analysis was applied for collecting and organising textual evidence.

The thesis analysed how gendered satire is employed as a vehicle for critiquing normative gendered behaviour and power structures within the social circles portrayed in Dawn

Powell's *Angels on Toast*. The analysis was conducted by focusing on the techniques of exaggeration, irony and incongruity. The thesis was guided by two research questions. Firstly, what kind of gendered criticism is present in the novel and how is satire used to deliver it? Secondly, by portraying characters who both participate in and critique the normative structures, does the satire reinforce or destabilise the status quo?

The results of the analysis situate *Angels on Toast* among Powell's other novels, which also have self-deception as a central theme. In *Angels on Toast*, self-deception is closely connected to performative identities, which has been established as the most important point of analysis. The analysis found that men, women and relationships were portrayed through satirical means, hence delivering indirect criticism against the status quo. It was revealed that both the male and female characters felt constrained in their societal roles. Female characters were depicted as more aware of their limitations. Their introspection reveals the issues with the system, but depicts the characters as pointing out ways which would help them adhere to it. A character who expressed the most female agency was portrayed as unlikable by other characters, insinuating that subversion of norms was risky. In addition, it was implied that male characters were just as constrained by the power structures, but they retained the illusion of full autonomy.

This goes to show that Powell has portrayed gender normative behaviour as limiting across gender lines and that both female and male characters struggle with adhering to these standards. Both femininity and masculinity are portrayed as requiring careful curation and upkeep, thus being inherently unstable. They are portrayed as being upheld by collective illusion, which consists of micropractices and repetitive behaviour. This is also reflected in the portrayal of romantic relations as transactional and contractual. Furthermore, the depiction of the marital institution highlighted double standards for the genders. For example, cheating is deemed as acceptable to men and unacceptable for women.

In conclusion, a gendered analysis of *Angels on Toast* portrayed performed identities as inherently unstable and fragmentary. The analysis showed the effectiveness of using satire as a means of criticising the status quo. This tool allows the novel to engage in indirect social commentary, while retaining the appearance of light entertaining fiction. The thesis shows thus that social satire can appear in genres that tend to be not taken seriously, especially when produced by women authors.

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RESÜMEE

TARTU ÜLIKOOL
ANGLISTIKA OSAKOND

Birgit Leetjõe

Gendered Satire In Dawn Powell's *Angels on Toast*.

Soolistatud satiir Dawn Powelli romaanis „Angels on Toast“.

Magistritöö

2026

Lehekülgede arv: 60

Annotatsioon:

Käesolev magistritöö uurib soolistatud satiiri Dawn Powelli romaanis „Angels on Toast“, kasutades selleks temaatilist analüüsi. Analüüsi käigus lähtuti satiiri tehnikatest, milleks olid antud töös liialdus, iroonia ja vastuolulisus. Töö eesmärk oli analüüsida, kuidas soolistatud satiir teoses kujutatud normatiivset käitumist ja võimustruktuure kaudselt kritiseerib.

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Märksõnad: soolistatud satiir, Dawn Powell, performatiivne identiteet, temaatiline analüüs

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