

Reading Glamour in Phyllis Brett Young's *The Torontonians*

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Article abstract

This article explores the relationships between fashion, glamour, celebrity, and Canadian literature, focusing specifically on Toronto, Canada. I argue for the value of “reading glamour” into Toronto’s literature by examining how glamour provides a socio-cultural insight into character and plot development and, moreover, elevates the character of the city itself. No doubt certain authors conjure up a glamorous cachet with their coterie of bohemian intellectual and literary salons but the writing itself rarely approaches the same level of glamorous celebration. However, reading glamour—that is, following Brown, tracing the language and grammar of glamour as a literary form linked to modern mass culture—extends the potential for literary and cultural expression of the text. As Gundle and Castelli argue, glamour is typically associated with the urban and cosmopolitan, and this paper explores how Toronto has historically engaged with its own sense of burgeoning celebrity, fashion, and glamour. By focusing on the work of Phyllis Brett Young’s *The Torontonians* (1960), I examine how glamour as a corollary to fashion challenges preconceptions of “Toronto the Good,” not only within the local urban imaginary but also on national and global levels.



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Abstract | *This article explores the relationships between fashion, glamour, celebrity, and Canadian literature, focusing specifically on Toronto, Canada. I argue for the value of “reading glamour” into Toronto’s literature by examining how glamour provides a socio-cultural insight into character and plot development and, moreover, elevates the character of the city itself. No doubt certain authors conjure up a glamorous cachet with their coterie of bohemian intellectual and literary salons but the writing itself rarely approaches the same level of glamorous celebration. However, reading glamour—that is, following Brown, tracing the language and grammar of glamour as a literary form linked to modern mass culture—extends the potential for literary and cultural expression of the text. As Gundell and Castelli argue, glamour is typically associated with the urban and cosmopolitan, and this paper explores how Toronto has historically engaged with its own sense of burgeoning celebrity, fashion, and glamour. By focusing on the work of Phyllis Brett Young’s *The Torontonians* (1960), I examine how glamour as a corollary to fashion challenges preconceptions of “Toronto the Good,” not only within the local urban imaginary but also on national and global levels.*

Résumé | *Cet article explore les relations entre mode, glamour, célébrité et littérature canadienne en se concentrant plus spécifiquement sur Toronto. J’entends prouver la valeur de la lecture du glamour dans la littérature de Toronto en examinant comment le glamour offre une interprétation socio-culturelle du développement de l’intrigue et des personnages et, de surcroît, élève le personnage de la ville elle-même. Il va sans dire que certains auteurs créent un cachet glamour grâce à leur coterie de salons intellectuels et bohémiens, mais l’écriture elle-même atteint rarement le même niveau de célébration glamour. Cependant, lire le glamour—c’est-à-dire, à la suite de Brown, suivre le langage et la grammaire du glamour comme une forme littéraire liée à la culture de masse moderne—élargit le potentiel d’expression littéraire et culturelle du texte. Comme le montrent Gundell et Castelli, le glamour est typiquement associé à l’urbain et au cosmopolitain, et cette communication explore comment Toronto s’est historiquement impliqué dans son propre sentiment grandissant de célébrité, de mode et de glamour. En me concentrant sur le livre de Phyllis Brett Young, *The Torontonians* (1960), j’examine comment le glamour, comme corollaire de la mode, challenge les préconceptions de “Toronto la bonne” non seulement à l’intérieur même de l’imaginaire urbain local, mais aussi aux niveaux national et global.*

And all the time, you pound your little Remington amid the office debris and push your copy through the cigarette-smoke barrage encircling the city editor's desk—and wonder, "What do they mean GLAMOUR?" – Nielsine Hansen, "What About Glamour?" (1929)

Introduction: The Language, Grammar and Challenges of Reading Glamour

The relationship between glamour and literature is not often immediately apparent. Glamour, for one, is not so easy to pin down. It is often referred to as an “elusive concept” (Wilson, “A Note on Glamour” 95) or more definitively as “a formal category and an experiential site of consumer desire, fantasy, sexuality, class, and racial identity” (Brown 1). The grammar of glamour inserts itself into the rhetoric of those intangible qualities that once demand and defy definition. Glamour’s associative range of qualities complicate its meaning. For all its vivid depictions in magazines, film, and art, the realm of glamour is exclusive to the broad scope of the imagination, lending its essence to works that reflect its ephemerality. Indeed, glamour has historically been linked with sorcery and metamorphoses; it is precisely glamour’s manipulation of reality that makes its essence so seductive.

Glamour’s etymology traces back to the old word “gramarye,” an alteration of the word grammar that connotes learning as well as the mystifying effects of magic or the act of being charmed. The word glamour was popularized in English by Sir Walter Scott in 1805 with the publication of his long narrative poem, “The Lay of the Last Minstrel.” Glamour, Scott wrote, “Could make a lady seem a knight; / The cobwebs on a dungeon wall / Seem tapestry in lordly hall.” Scott’s use

of glamour was an Anglicized version of “glamer,” which according to *An Etymological Dictionary of the Scottish Language* (1897) referred to “the supposed influence of a charm on the eye, causing it to see objects differently from what they really are” (qtd. in Gundle and Castelli 3). In tracing glamour’s origins, its literary connections are evident. Glamour emerges as a literary form (Brown 9) in the modern era that communicates the language and grammar of transformation through its ability to stir desire and create the illusion of an eternal moment. In a *New Yorker* article discussing the glamour of famed Brazilian author, Clarice Lispector, Benjamin Moser affirms glamour’s power of transfiguration by reflecting upon Lispector’s particular literary glamour. He notes that her distinct brand is “dangerous” citing an anecdote from one of her friends that warned her readers that “it’s not literature. It’s witchcraft” (“The True Glamour of Clarice Lispector”).

Certainly, celebrated works of fiction carry glamour’s lexical charm. In her study of glamour as an aesthetic symbol of modernity that emerged out of the industrial revolution, Judith Brown maintains that glamour has ties to progress and mass culture and can be used as a methodological tool to assess literature, photography, celebrity and commodity culture. She makes the case for *reading* glamour in works of modernist literature by arguing that:

If critics have generally ignored the concept of glamour, modern writers at times explicitly invoked its magical powers, finding in its effect an expressive capacity akin to that of literature; among those who actually use the word and invoke its power are Joseph Conrad, D. H. Lawrence, and Virginia Woolf (9).

For Brown, glamour is an aesthetic property of modernist literature that has come out of the United Kingdom and the United States; yet her practice of reading glamour extends the potential for reading practices across literary movements, temporalities, and nationalities. This article builds upon the complexities and practice of reading glamour, as suggested by Brown, and turns toward a Canadian context that focuses on reading glamour in Phyllis Brett Young's 1960 novel *The Torontonians*. Young's text offers a particularly striking starting point into the discussion concerning glamour's expression in the city by focusing on a moneyed and upper-class Toronto of the 1950s. As Coral Ann Howells argues, we can understand that "*The Torontonians* [is] a product of Canadian cultural nationalism of the '50s and '60s, reflecting a new era of prosperity and consumerism" (56). I would extend her point to include glamour as a particularly national component of Young's text and one that challenges the 1960s perception of "Toronto the Good."¹ To be sure, glamour's talisman-like quality often lends itself to narratives that seek to challenge the borders of convention and good taste. Glamour, therefore, is Janus-faced. On one hand, it is routinely yoked together with celebrity culture, which conjures up nostalgia for images of Hollywood's Golden Age, and on the other hand, glamour belies a genuine terror for the natural world. Glamour's outward appearance is generally a reaction against the seemingly mundane or the absolutely horrific, recalling Shakespeare's famous line from the *Merchant of Venice* that "All that glitters is not gold" (2.7.73).

This article, therefore, considers how reading glamour in *The Torontonians* is an exercise in challenging the preconceptions of the city, as the language, grammar, and challenges of glamour are used to de-stabilize assumptions and

attitudes surrounding post-war Toronto while simultaneously acknowledging the anxiety of the developing modern city. Through Young's protagonist, Karen, a feminized urbane glamour emerges, thus building and expanding upon the dimensions of Canadian urban writing.

Finding Glamour in the Margins in Toronto's Literature

Northrop Frye's conception of the "garrison mentality," that is, the sense of hostility towards nature by earlier Canadian settlers, has had a profound influence on the country's literature. While the trope of the Canadian landscape and wilderness has long dominated literary discourse, the Canadian urban novel has had a powerful, albeit often invisible, history, articulating a counter-narrative to the myth of the land (Iverson and Edwards 10). Nevertheless, for many years Torontonians maintained an intense bias against their own writers resulting in a cultural negation of the city's literary heritage. This "persistent self-loathing" (Harris 19) extends as far back to the turn of the century, as outlined in "Literature in Canada" (1899), an essay by novelist and critic Robert Barr:

The bald truth is that Canada has the money, but would rather spend it on whiskey than on books. [...]. What chance has Canada, then, of raising a Sir Walter Scott? I maintain that she has but very little chance, because she won't pay the money, and money is the root of all literature. The new Sir Walter is probably tramping the streets of Toronto to-day, looking vainly for something to do. But Toronto will recognize him when he comes back from New York or London, and will give him a dinner when he doesn't need it. (qtd. in Harris 19)

In summoning Scott, the patron of glamour, Barr inadvertently addresses a longing for glamour's expression to radiate not simply within the pages of the city's literature but also in its celebration of literature as a national good.

Prior to the 1970s very little Canadian fiction was actively situated in Toronto. For example, Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman* (1969) is notorious for taking place in a nondescript and anonymous urban landscape only vaguely hinting that the downtown she describes may be Toronto and not a nameless American metropolis. Yet in the decades after, particularly in the early aughts, Toronto as a tangible space imbued with its own sense of culture and mythology became increasingly popular in fiction by Toronto authors.² Justin D. Edwards and Douglas Ivison, the editors of *Downtown Canada: Writing Canadian Cities* (2005), similarly champion the rise of the Canadian urban novel with their cri de cœur to honour the country's downtown spaces in its national literature:

No longer are we content to engage in thematic studies which privilege the wilderness, rural areas, or the small town as the place upon which Canadian identity is constructed. Instead we seek to bridge the gap that exists between the lived experiences of most Canadians, who overwhelmingly live in urban environments, and the public mythology of Canada and critical production on Canadian literature and culture, which has, until recently, largely focused on rural and wilderness spaces and small towns. (6)

The literary shift that began to assert itself toward the latter part of the 20th century to the present highlights Canadian cities as spaces equally worthy of celebration and critical

discourse. Toronto-based literature continues to contribute and shape the production of the city, and arguably the city has contributed and shaped the production of literature (Edwards and Ivison 9). A similar sentiment is taken up in Amy Lavender Harris' *Imagining Toronto*, arguing that Toronto is a textual city, and her work seeks to interpret Toronto literature against the backdrop of the city itself. Harris writes in her introduction:

This book is predicated on a belief that rather than comparing Toronto to the world's other great literary cities and finding it wanting, we should instead realize that Toronto's literature reflects an entirely new kind of city, a city where identity emerges not from shared tradition or a long history but rather is forged out of commitment to the virtues of diversity, tolerance and cultural understanding. (14)

Harris' approach to the city reflects my interpretation of the relationship between glamour and Toronto. Whereas prominent textual cities such as Paris, London, New York City, and Los Angeles are instinctively associated with glamour in the global imagination, Toronto is consistently negotiating its literary glamour as the city continues to develop and change.

Glamour, of course, is not a word that immediately comes to mind in discussions of Toronto literature. At one point in *The Torontonians*, Karen jokingly remarks, "Toronto itself, in spite of what the rest of Canada seemed to think of it, had been a lovely city to live in. At the time nobody would have dreamed of calling it the New York of Canada" (101). Caroline Rosenthal further corroborates this claim: "In an international perspective, Toronto lacks not only the glamour but also the darker aspects of New York.

It is commonly regarded as the safer, cleaner, and more tolerant, albeit duller, of the two cities" (31). The use of "glamour" in this context is clearly instructive in its suggestion that Toronto, within the urban imaginary, is completely devoid of glamour, especially compared to the much-mythologized New York City. Rosenthal continues: "As an imaginative city, Toronto is still in the process of becoming, not because there has been no fiction set in Toronto earlier in the twentieth century, but because it is only now that it is being discussed as a significant corpus of literature and as a way of symbolically building the city" (33). Reading glamour, therefore, in Toronto literature becomes an exercise in challenging these preconceptions of the city and of the city's literature entirely.

In the Summer 2017 issue of *University of Toronto Quarterly*, Brandon McFarlane discusses the emergent Canadian fiction of 2015 and its tendency toward post-industrialist fiction. McFarlane draws upon Richard Lloyd's investigation into the rise of neo-bohemian spaces under the "grit-as-glamour" aesthetic that "suggests that some [Canadian] authors are breathing new life into old myths while creating radically new, transnational aesthetics that can mediate the disruptions and opportunities presented by the era of post-industrialism" (4). Nevertheless, prior to the grit-as-glamour prose, which has become more pervasive in recent Canadian fiction as the country's major cities have become more global, Phyllis Brett Young was embarking upon her own creation myth for Toronto, using the transformative language of glamour to demonstrate how Toronto was a burgeoning city with a new sense of identity "perched at the edge of modernity" (Harris 289).

Upon first blush, the language of glamour mixed with the spirit of modernity may make

for strange bedfellows, yet the two are intrinsically tied. Charles Baudelaire famously coined the term "modernity" in "The Painter of Modern Life" (1864) to convey the aesthetic and relative nature of time: "By 'modernity' I mean the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent, the half of art whose other half is the eternal and the immutable" (13). Glamour, as Brown states, is "produced in the glance backward, now cedes itself to the future, where it may acquire new dimensions in a different language" (19). Both concepts are further reflected in the "mental life" that Georg Simmel outlined in, "The Metropolis and Mental Life," concerning the *modern* urban metropolis and how industrialism and rapid urbanization affects the spaces, both mental and physical, of its citizens. Certainly, Baudelaire's Paris and Simmel's Berlin occupy differing concerns from their separate geographies and eras, yet the 1950s post-war culture in Toronto exhibited in Young's text brims with cautious optimism and genuine desire to embrace the modern.³

Toronto was a boom town where, with the easing of the liquor laws, you could at last buy a drink in public. That is, a real drink, something stronger than four-point beer. A cocktail in a place like the Cork Room, or the Silver Rail, cost you three times what it would have cost you at home, but you went to the bars in spite of this because the bars represented glamour and novelty. (60)

Glamour is broadly defined by its various combinations of fashion, beauty, luxury, celebrity, and wealth; however, early conceptions of glamour were associated with the fascination of the early modern city and modernity itself (see Gundle and Castelli). Young acknowledges Toronto's puritanical past by highlighting its harsh liquor laws but invokes the glamour of the bar as a fashionable space of conspicuous consumption

that reflects the changing mores of the modern city.⁴ While *The Torontonians* is not considered a modernist text, albeit, it is a text that considers modern themes, it nonetheless bristles with domestic existentialism as Karen, too, recognizes the potential for her own personal glamour that correlates within the fashionable space that Toronto portends.

Phyllis Brett Young and the
Glamour of *The Torontonians*

In 2007, McGill-Queen's Press re-issued *The Torontonians*, thus reviving the name Phyllis Brett Young in Canadian literary discourse. In the introduction to the novel, Nathalie Cooke and Suzanne Morton demonstrate that while Phyllis Brett Young is not a common name in the Canadian literary canon, in the early 1960s she was an internationally regarded author alongside notable Canadian writers of the time such as Hugh McLennan and Mordecai Richler. Young was born in Toronto in 1914 and between the years 1959 and 1969 she published four novels, a memoir, and a thriller published under the pseudonym Kendal Young. *The Torontonians*, her second novel, was an instant bestseller both in Canada and the United States, where it first appeared in hardcopy in October 1960. Certainly, this was no small feat for a book that is exclusively and unreservedly very much about late-1950s suburban Toronto. Young was so deeply committed to showcasing Toronto as a vibrant city that she had to fight with her publishers to keep the title. American and British publishers, however, were not persuaded. According to Young's daughter, Valerie Argue, "In those days for a novel, or movie, to be set in Canada (and especially Toronto!) was the kiss of death for international sales" (x). Instead, Young's novel was renamed for the international market under two different titles, *Gift of Time* in the U.S and Europe and *The*

Commuters in Australia, ensuring no immediate reference to Canada's largest city (Argue xi). Nevertheless, when the novel was released local Toronto bookstores were experiencing "unusually large sales" (Fulford qtd. in Grewal) and *The New York Times* professed: "In a growing catalogue of books that have been proving the sweet life of suburbia, Mrs. Young's stand out as both wise and witty" (qtd. in Grewal), thus guaranteeing Young a modicum of celebrity.

In the foreword to the 2007 reissue, Valerie Argue writes, "It was not just Toronto and Torontonians but Canada and Canadians that Phyllis Brett Young wanted to put on the map, and in each of her works she tries to do just that. As she said in an *Ottawa Citizen* interview (7 April 1960), 'I write because I love Canada and I wish more and more people would write about Canada as it is today'" (xi). Through Karen, Young offers meditations upon the development of the city that are filled with worldly insight and solid criticism acknowledging that Toronto is in the process of becoming a city of the imagination:

After Geneva, you were more critical of Toronto than you had been in the past, but paradoxically you loved it more than you ever had, and you were damn proud of it. It was not London, and it was not Paris, but it was Toronto, and that was more than good enough for you. You were terribly excited about this St. Lawrence Seaway thing they had started to talk about, because you could see that if it went through, your city, your Toronto, could become one of the great inland seaports of the world. (149)

Through Karen's judicious perspective, *The Torontonians* unfolds like a creation myth that explains the essence of the city to the rest of the

world offering a glimpse of its own particular urbane glamour.

Young's novel begins: "Early morning sunlight warm against the thin, smooth contour of one cheek, Karen sat in the breakfast-room and thought about suicide" (7). This opening sentence faintly echoes Ezra's Pound's famous imagist poem "In a Station of the Metro"⁵ with its simple yet profound meditation of the morning. The cool, detached narrative style and stony prose develop like a photograph in a dark room, slowly setting the tone for the rest of the novel. The inherent sheen of glamour is apparent in the untouched beauty of the "Early morning sunlight," an alluring spectre, followed by the description of Karen's slick cheek as if she were a brand-new sportscar. Meanwhile, Young's opening line hints at the sinister elements of the novel with its casual suggestion of suicide revealing Karen's darker desires. The nonchalant approach to self-harm is faintly reminiscent of a 1929 journal article from *The Iowa Homemaker* titled, "What About the Glamour?" in which the author Nielsine Hansen bemoans that "there will be days when your public will ring in kicks from morning until night until suicide looks like the primrose path" (3); yet despite the annoyance and despair she concludes "Isn't there some glamour in that?" (3).

Phyllis Brett Young's Toronto exists through a lens of post-war ennui, where ladies lunch and men work on Bay Street and come home to cooked dinners made by their wives—living up to its reputation as "Toronto the Good." Karen Whitney, the protagonist of Young's proto-feminist novel,⁶ dreams of being more than just a mother and wife in a nicely manicured, Leaside-type home. Her psychological struggle to achieve a sense of purpose beyond her socially prescribed role forces her to reflect upon certain

events that happened in her life while growing up in the city. As Karen carefully examines her past, Young expertly weaves Toronto developmental milestones into the narrative, such as the opening of the Yonge subway line in 1954 and plans to construct the new City Hall. This *pas de deux* reveals as much about Karen's personal growth as that of the city's, intrinsically linking the two. The sense of optimism that concludes the novel reads as a forecast for the city that insists there is potential beyond Toronto's simple "good" moniker.⁷

The cover of the 1960 Canadian version of *The Torontonians* (Fig. 1) features a sketch of the new Toronto City Hall in the background while at

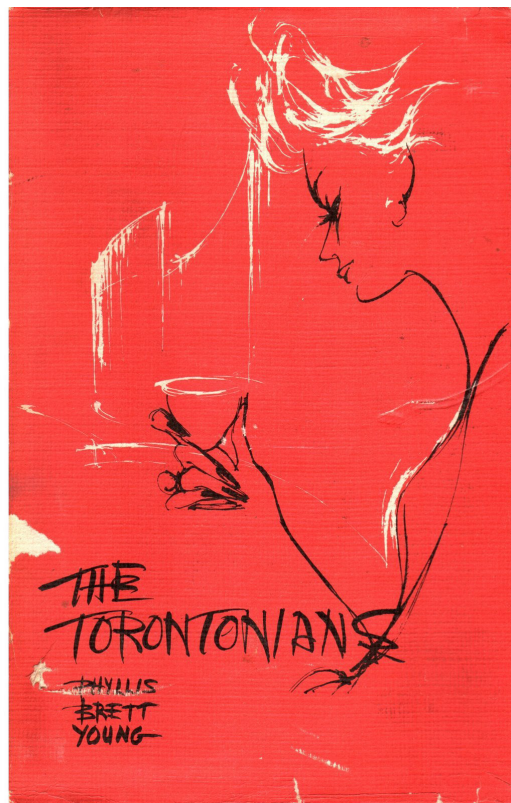


Fig. 1 Cover of the 1960 Canadian version of *The Torontonians*

the fore is an outline of a stylish woman drinking from a martini glass. The construction of the new city hall in 1965 by the Finnish architect Viljo Revell was a feat of modernist architecture and a nod toward the future of the city. With its two curved asymmetric towers, the new City Hall ushered in an era of enthusiasm and pride for the city. Revell had won an international competition to construct the building that would define the city. Many Toronto firms had put forth their own designs but were rebuffed by the public for looking too plain and boring.⁸ In a *Toronto Star* article celebrating the 50th anniversary of the construction of the new City Hall, Ryerson University architecture professor George Kapelos explained why the competition was so important for the city:

It wasn't just about Toronto, but a convergence of a whole lot of issues that catalyzed here in this city. People were agitating for newness and modernity. Around the globe, interest in rebuilding cities was intense. Issues such as decolonization, monumentality and national identity were on everyone's mind. The timing was amazing. (qtd. in Hume)

The juxtaposition of City Hall's blueprints alongside the silhouette of a woman in the foreground conveys the grammar of glamour in its nod toward futurity and inaccessibility. The woman is presented as an ephemeral figure of beauty and fashion, yet "glamour goes beyond mere fashion. Although the concept of glamour includes fashion, it ultimately involves more than what a woman puts on her body. It deals with the lady herself" (Basinger qtd. in Steele 38). *The Torontonians* is a text that *deals* with the transformation of a city and the anxieties and desires that lie within. Indeed, both City Hall and the woman

on the cover of *The Torontonians* are rendered as apparitions that are waiting to *be*.

The Modes of Female Glamour

The Torontonians was serialized in the pages of *Chatelaine* appearing in three instalments in the October, November, and December issues of 1960. According to Cooke and Morton, "in the 1960s *Chatelaine* explored the very issues at the heart of Young's novel—the roles and choices available for women in a changing world and the possibilities and anxieties caused by change—in a number of formats within each issue" (xxv). As a distinctly feminine text—one that was featured in a woman's magazine devoted to "female issues,"⁹ including fashion and lifestyle advice — *The Torontonians* exemplifies a glamour that is specifically female.

Glamour, I propose, manifests itself differently in male- and female-driven narratives. For men, glamour is typified by a desire for success. Arguably, one of the most glamorous characters in the English-speaking language from the past one hundred years would be Oscar Wilde's demonic dandy, Dorian Gray. For Dorian, success is measured by his eternal youth and beauty: "And when winter came upon [the portrait], he would still be standing where spring trembles on the verge of summer. When the blood crept from its face, and left behind a pallid mask of chalk with leaden eyes, he would keep the glamour of boyhood" (72). A comparable American counterpoint would be the iconic Jay Gatsby who relies on glamorous excess in order to entice his beloved Daisy Buchanan with his success: "To the young Gatz, resting on his oars and looking up at the railed deck, the yacht represented all the beauty and glamour in the world" (107). A similarly classic example of a Canadian exhibition of male glamour within the country's

literary canon is Robertson Davies' Dustan Ramsay in *Fifth Business*. The entirety of the text reads as a defence of Ramsay's success while celebrating his glamorous exploits.

The modes of glamour take on a different narrative when the central character is a woman. Female glamour is made evident by the character's longing for circumstances different from her own. Carol Dyhouse notes, "glamour was often linked to a dream of transformation, a desire for something out of the ordinary, a form of aspiration, a *fiction* of female becoming" (3, added emphasis). One may be reminded of Gustave Flaubert's Emma Bovary poring through fashion magazines day-dreaming of a more glamorous life away from her boring husband. That *The Torontonians* appeared in the pages of a fashion magazine is by no means incidental. As Howells argues, "Young's emphasis is on fashionable body images of women and glamour" (58), the staple features of women's fashion magazines. More to the point, Young emphasizes women in Toronto in the 1950s who occupy one of Canada's preeminent cosmopolitan spaces. For women reading Young's text in the pages of *Chatelaine* magazine in the far reaches of Canada's smaller town and rural communities, Toronto's glamorous position as a growing modern cosmopolis would have been keenly understood. In *Roughing it in the Suburbs: Reading Chatelaine Magazine in the Fifties and Sixties*, Valerie Korinek goes into detail about one particular article from 1954 that describes how a young woman from northeastern Nova Scotia was magically transformed into "The Cinderella from Pugwash" while getting a head-to-toe makeover in Toronto. When she returns to her small town with her new hairdo and sophisticated fashion her family is shocked by her transformation, if not a little put off by her new cosmopolitan style. As Korinek remarks, "the meaning was obvious in this

piece: style and glamour triumphed over down-home values and the natural look" (201). So too, does Young's text reveal the ways in which glamour in the city is a chimera that is both fanciful and frightening in its ability to change public personas and ambitions.

Much of the narrative focuses on Karen fantasizing about her life as a younger woman with her lover in Geneva when the world seemed to be full of possibility instead of limited by her current life circumstances as a homemaker in the fictional Toronto suburban neighbourhood of Rowanwood. Certainly, *The Torontonians* would have resonated with the readers of *Chatelaine* at the time, many of whom would surely have shared Karen's frustrations:

If you had been a stranger from another planet, you might have wondered if Rowanwood was inhabited at all. You would not have understood the phenomenon of mid-morning doldrums. You had to live in Rowanwood to know that the men had all left the boxes in which they lived for other boxes in the business section downtown; to know that the women were either hidden inside cleaning the former, or had gone off in smaller mechanized boxes to the shopping plaza. These things explained to you, you, the stranger from another planet, would still fail to understand why the women should spend so much time shut up in their boxes. You would, if you had come equipped with any knowledge of the civilization you had invaded, wonder how on Earth women had allowed themselves to be hoodwinked into believing what the manufacturers wanted them to believe—that they had never had it so good. (55)

Judith Brown refers to “The Moment of Glamour,” the point where the character exists as a moment distinct from the ordinary passage of time: “There will be no reckless galloping forward of narrative time but the unsteady interplay of past, present, and future that become layered, almost inseparable” (78). Young’s narrator often breaks into the second person, effectively blending the passage of time and sense of place. The speaker’s tone is at once sympathetic and accusatory, prompting us to wonder if the speaker is admonishing Karen or the reader when she reflects:

You did not at the time realize what was happening to you, because when you were really young, rather than “still young” as the magazines now put it, you were resilient. Incredibly so. It wasn’t until much later, when you found yourself thinking of death as a restful state, and saw your friends leaning on barbiturates, whiskey, and tranquilizers, that you began to understand that, somehow, mechanical evolution had outstripped any social evolution as it might apply to you and most of your generation. (13)

The narrative shift from omniscient to second person is simultaneously intimate and alienating—an effect that reveals part of the grammar of glamour in its “unsteady interplay” of narrative points of view. Ilya Parkins similarly muses that “the glamorous feminine figure might be better understood to complicate the chain of binaries on which modernity rests” (192). In this regard, Karen’s slow mental breakdown ultimately challenges the prevailing associations and binaries of man/culture/city and woman/nature/home.

Glamour, Brown notes, is “the ache for the beautiful thing just out of reach” (87) and in reading

glamour the narrative must effectively convey the “beautiful thing” as far from the reader’s grasp as possible. Brown further argues “Glamour is starkly aligned with the coldness of technology, the rush into the future [...], and therefore bears a relationship to reality, although its reality is nevertheless one of masks and illusion” (106). *The Torontonians*, at its core, is about the “mechanical evolution” of the city and the hesitancy with which the characters accept its steady development into a cosmopolitan urban centre. In this, the reader cannot fully identify with Karen without potentially acknowledging their own deeper desires and anxieties that the second-person narrative demands.

Glamour, no doubt, can be cruel and oppressive to women. At the start of the novel Karen is 40-years old and has two grown daughters who are away in university. She married her husband, Rick, right out of college and immediately had children at a young age. She then stayed home to take care of her children while her husband was away, all the while looking the part of the “executive’s wife in a fish blue cotton dress, its utility denied by a wide collar and a frivolously full skirt” (46). Karen’s speech is often imbued with the tropes of glamour: fashion, beauty, and youth. At one point she looks in the mirror and remarks: “I look [...] as if I had stepped out of *Vogue*. A cardboard doll cut out of nothing. I am a success. I have conformed to the pattern, and I wish to God I hadn’t. How have I let this thing happen to me? When did it begin, and where?” (47). Karen’s frustrations were certainly not endemic to Toronto women of the 1950s, but the acknowledgement that she was “simply losing a battle with Helena Rubinstein” (47) demonstrates that Torontonian women shared a sophisticated knowledge of the punishments and indignities that they often must endure.¹⁰

Glamour's Blithe Spirit

Certainly, *The Torontonians* exhibits a very white and wealthy expression of glamour echoed by Karen's recollection of some social doggerel she reads in *Saturday Night*: "Toronto has no classes, / Only the Masseys and the masses" (144). Indeed, who are the Torontonians in *The Torontonians*? Howells further asks, "who are these people designated by the novelist as representative of the city and its values?" (58). Certainly, there is a whiff of *chutzpah* in a title that suggests the definitive text of the city. Moreover, Howells' work suggests that Young's title is ironic given that "the spatial conception of Toronto is focused almost entirely on the new burgeoning suburbia" (59). Karen refers to this area as "The Hill," referring to the geography of the neighbourhoods north of Bloor Street. Rowanwood, while fictional, would have resembled the tonier uptown neighbourhoods such as Rosedale, Forest Hill, and Leaside.

The concept of glamour has rightly been criticized for its focus on wealth, and whiteness, and the exoticization of certain cultures and people,¹¹ but of course, *The Torontonians* is also a product of its time. Laura Mulvey provides further context by referencing American mass consumption in the 1950s:

It was a time when, in the context of the cold war, advertising, movies and the actual packaging and seductiveness of commodities all marketed glamour. Glamour proclaimed the desirability of American capitalism to the outside world and, inside, secured Americanness as inspiration for the newly suburbanized white population as it buried incompatible memories of immigrant origins. (96)

Beyond glamour's common material components of beauty, youth, and wealth lies less charming elements such as class division, commoditization, and envy. However, there are many different types of glamour that extend beyond fashion and luxury. As Virginia Postrel notes, "Glamour is an imaginative process that creates a specific emotional response: a sharp mixture of projection, longing, admiration, and aspiration. It evokes an audience's hopes and dreams and makes them seem attainable, all the while maintaining enough distance to sustain the fantasy" (140). For Young, writing in the 1950s and 60s, Toronto had the potential for glamorous escape much in the same way that narratives that feature prominent textual cities such as New York, Paris, or London offered its characters the experience of seduction and enchantment. Nevertheless, Young was also aware of the tensions between "old" and "new" Torontonians. In *Imagining Toronto*, Harris addresses one of the more overtly satirical moments in the novel when one of Karen's obnoxious neighbours, Millicent, phones and insists that Karen partake in the charity bridge tournaments she's organizing to help "New Canadians":

You could trace the history of the world back across a good many years just by remembering Millicent's brief but forceful enthusiasms. The Koreans, the Israelis, the evicted Egyptians, the Hungarians. Without even looking at a newspaper, you could be quite certain that things were relatively quiet in foreign parts if Millicent could find nothing more alarming with which to concern herself than the difficulties, if any, of New Canadians. (14)

The joke, Harris points out, is that Millicent fails to recognize Rowanwood's homogeneous population, made up entirely of white Anglo-Saxons,

where the motto of its inhabitants is “everybody should live in ranch-style bungalows and be just like themselves” (21).

The Torontonians is indeed a novel of manners, and arguably, a novel of *manors* as well given how much attention is placed on the nicely manicured lawns and interior designs of the houses in Rowanwood. The language exhibited in the text often verges on high modernism with its change in narrative tone and imagistic tendencies, yet simultaneously the text frequently reads like a Noël Coward play¹² set in the suburbs of Toronto instead of Manhattan, featuring a cast of well-heeled sophisticates exchanging witty *bon mots*:

“But don’t you love it darling?”
 “That might be putting it a little strongly,”
 Rick said.
 “You’re not a woman.”
 “I think somebody once pointed
 that out to me before.” (70)

The charming interplay among the characters is interspersed among the various social gatherings they are either hosting or attending, thereby exhibiting a constant air of sophistication and glamour. Sophistication and glamour plainly share many similar traits, although Faye Hammill is quick to point out that “The word ‘sophistication’ undoubtedly has a much longer and more etymologically complex history than ‘glamour’; I would also argue that the idea of sophistication as a desirable quality goes back a little further than the idea of glamour” (19-20). Young, for her part, made a point to treat Toronto as the “sophisticated, cosmopolitan city it is” (qtd. in Grewal), and as such she created characters that reflect a Toronto imbued with the tenets of glamour and sophistication in popular fiction. In this regard, she effectively shifted the

discourse away from the wilderness and ravines and embraced the beauty, desires, and tensions of the modern city.

Conclusion: Finding the Glamour of Home

The Torontonians, for the modern reader, is a fantasy of a bygone era in Toronto that elevates the narrative’s textual glamour. Indeed, glamour and nostalgia share similar aesthetic properties as expressions of the untouchable and distant past. Elizabeth Wilson notes, almost tautologically, that the “longing of nostalgia has a glamour or a sweetness of its own” (*Cultural Passions* 35), which resonates in the pages of Young’s text as she glosses over decades of the city’s development. The layers of glamour and nostalgia work in tandem in *The Torontonians*, as the modern reader may yearn for the glamour of the past while Karen comes to understand that she has glamorized her past in Geneva and is slowly recognizing the possibility that the modern city offers. Toward the end of *The Torontonians*, Karen walks towards Queen’s Park and makes the realization that the freshly manicured homes of Rowanwood are not for her:

A city with a future, like an individual with a future, could never remain static for long, could not afford to expand indefinitely along the lines of least resistance. The suburbs, as they now existed, were the city’s lines of least resistance. The towering buildings to the south were the real yardstick of its stature. (319)

To be sure, Toronto has had prior difficulty accepting its stature and potential as a glamorous cosmopolitan space. In a *Toronto Star* article discussing the use of the Toronto Reference Library as the site for a music video by The Weeknd, a popular Scarborough-raised singer,

Edward Keenan writes, “Sometimes you need something like a music video to make you look at your own city with new eyes. See the glamour of your home.” Indeed, Wilson attests that, “The appearance of glamour resides, though, or is created in combination with dress, hair, scent, and even *mise en scène*” (“A Note on Glamour” 107). As a matter of course, definitions of glamour are slippery and mutable as well as personal. The language of glamour that infuses the *The Torontonians* communicates a distinctly white middle-class feminine desire to move beyond the suburban domestic sphere of the 1950s into the developing and lively bustle of the urban core that the city promises. Certainly, Phyllis Brett Young’s work offers a window into an exciting time in the city’s history, seemingly showcasing the glamour of home. However, the Toronto of *The Torontonians* has vastly changed since its publication. The current expression of glamour in the city reveals itself in the celebrity of Drake and The Weeknd, both racialized people, underscoring how the glamour of home is a partial reflection of Toronto’s vibrant multiculturalism. Young’s work does not anticipate the increased diversity of the city’s growing population nor does it foresee the patina of glamour that paints the city during spectacular events such as the Toronto International Film Festival, the Toronto Pride Parade, Caribana or fashion week; however *The Torontonians* does assume an innate glamour for the city that, much like definitions of glamour, remains fluid.

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Notes

1 The “good” moniker is attributed to William Howland, the 25th mayor of Toronto from 1886-87, who coined the phrase “Toronto the Good” in an attempt to rid the city of all manner of vices including gambling, drugs and prostitution.

2 See Russell Smith *Noise* (1998); Dionne Brand *What We All Long For* (2005); Stephen Marche *Raymond and Hannah* (2005); Michael Redhill *Consolation* (2006); for a comprehensive list and celebration of the city’s literature see the now defunct, but still available, website “Reading Toronto” <http://readingt.readingcities.com/index.php>

3 In *Modern Realism in Canadian Fiction* Colin Hill acknowledges that while scarce, there is a tradition of modernist fiction in Canada, however a modernist literary history of Canadian writing has yet to be written (5).

4 In “Parsexuality and Glamour: The Victorian Barmaid as Cultural Prototype” Peter Bailey relates glamour to modernity and identified it as a property involving public visibility of a desirable object such as the Victorian barmaid who functioned as a distancing mechanism fuelling desire and envy from her patrons.

5 “The apparition of these faces in the crowd; / Petals on a wet, black bough.” (Pound: 1913).

6 Phyllis Brett Young’s daughter, Valerie Argue, acknowledges in the foreword to the 2007 reissue of *The Torontonians*: “My mother was not a feminist. However, she undoubtedly would have been had she been born in 1944 instead of 1914. In *The Torontonians* one can see her attempt — played out through her heroine Karen — to come to terms not only with post World War II materialism but also with the strong social

pressure on a woman to find fulfillment as lady of the suburban manor” (viii).

7 A version of this section has appeared in *Descant* 162, “Beyond Toronto the Good and Banal,” 2013.

8 Many of these designs were exhibited recently in 2015 at the Paul Cocker Gallery for their exhibition “Shaping Canadian Modernity” as part of the 50th anniversary celebrations of City Hall. See also George Kapelos’ *Competing Modernisms: Toronto’s New City Hall and Square* (2015) and *Civic Symbol: Creating Toronto’s New City Hall, 1952-1966* (2015) by Christopher Armstrong for further exploration into the construction and competition of Toronto’s City Hall.

9 Many issues that were tackled in the pages of *Chatelaine* in the early 1960s are rather progressive given the context of the era. In the “Features” section women wrote articles exploring difficulties in and out of the home including frank discussions about the ambivalence of motherhood which included the line that another pregnancy was as “welcome as the income tax” (Cooke and Morton xxv).

10 Young’s invocation of Rubinstein is fitting given her feud with the Ontario-born, Elizabeth Arden.

11 Stephen Gundle’s chapter on “The Hollywood Star System” in *Glamour: A History* (2008) provides in depth detail into ways that Hollywood’s golden age made “room for diversity” by ensuring that “ethnic difference was turned into exotic spectacle” (182).

12 Faye Hammill’s *Sophistication: A Literary and Cultural History* (2010) and John Potvin’s *Bachelors of a Different Sort: Queer Aesthetics, Material Culture and the Modern Interior in Britain* (2014) provide excellent analyses into the grammar of glamour in the works of Noël Coward.