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The 'Good Girl' in the City: Urban Life and the Limits
of the Empowered Woman in *The Devil Wears Prada*

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Introduction

Freedom is certainly one of the most typical characteristics of urban life. "The city is the zone of individual freedom", Elizabeth Wilson writes, "[t]here, the ties of family and kinship may be loosened and avenues of escape may open up" (16). Despite the freedom the city offers, women's presence in urban spaces has for a long time been marked by a struggle for the right to enjoy the benefits of this freedom. Life in the city enabled women to move outside the confines of their traditional place, the home, and to enter public spaces that had so far been reserved for men, which created an image of the female as transgressive and uncontrollable (cf. Rendell, quoted in Murphy 35) and led to a perception of femininity as a threat to the patriarchal social order. Consequently, social norms for men and women differed greatly. They functioned to control women and to restrict their presence in public spaces by denying them the freedom to move at will in the city and to explore the urban space on their own without having to fear a loss of their social status. It was regarded as morally dubious for women to enter the streets alone and without a justifiable purpose. "All women who loitered risked being seen as whores, as the term "street-walker" or "tramp" applied to women makes clear", Susan Buck-Morss points out, suggesting that "[t]he politics of this close connection between the debasement of women sexually and their presence in public space . . . functioned to deny [them] power" (119). Although the situation changed considerably in the 20th century as women began to gain access to the city as consumers¹ and as participants in the professional world, the question of freedom and the distribution of power in urban spaces are still regarded as highly dependent on gender.² Nevertheless, urban life in general is considered as having emancipated women despite its difficulties (cf. Wilson 10).

Life in the city and its potential for emancipation, especially with regard to the independence it offers to women, seems to be a popular recent theme in film and television. In the chick flick and romantic comedy genres, narratives based on women's experience in professional life are frequently set in an urban surrounding. There seems to be a tendency to present the female characters as "empowered" by modern urban life due to their high-reaching careers and their freedom to choose an individual lifestyle. This image of empowered femininity in an urban world has been made popular, for example, by the television series *Sex and the City*. However, the ideal of the empowered woman also has its competitors. Although, as Tasker points out, "a variety of films and genres in the late 1990s and early 2000s hype empowerment" (107), there are also trends that run contrary to this one. In many films that focus on women's lives in the city, the protagonist's struggle to balance her professional ambition and her private life leads to a conflict which is frequently solved by the woman's

decision to give a higher priority to romance and personal relationships than to her career (cf. Negra, pars. 5-6). A more obvious rejection of the image of the empowered career woman can be found in a trend promoting what Tasker calls scenarios of "retreatism" or "downsizing", in which "a well-educated white female professional displays her 'empowerment' and caring nature by withdrawing from the workforce (and symbolically from the public sphere) to devote herself to husband and family" (108). Examples of this trend to reinvent the idea of empowerment as a move away from an urban setting and the professional world can be found in recent television series like *Desperate Housewives* or *Weeds*, which explicitly place their female protagonists in a purely suburban and domestic setting.

Nevertheless, the city also remains a site for negotiating empowerment as, for example, *The Devil Wears Prada* shows. Although it is primarily a film about the fashion scene, the female experience of urban space also seems to be one of the film's central themes. "The modern woman unleashes the animal within to take on the big city" (*The Devil Wears Prada*, ch. 19) is the motto of a fashion photo shoot in the film, but the ideas implicit in this concept also appear to be a thread running through the film's image of women's lives in the city. With regard to the question of empowerment, David Frankel's adaptation of Lauren Weisberger's autobiographic novel is placed somewhere in between the two trends mentioned above. The film's urban setting, New York City, is set up as the ideal place for "the modern woman" due to the freedom and chances it provides for the female characters. As active participants in the professional world they, quite literally, "take on the big city." On the other hand, the idea of "unleashing the animal" with its connotations of the uncontrollable, savage and dangerous also reflects the film's ambiguous position towards the empowered woman. In presenting urban life as empowering women, the film seems to take a 'backlash' perspective by villainizing empowerment and promoting the 'good girl' as the feminine ideal. The intention of this paper is to trace the aspects of urban life that are presented as empowering the female characters as well as to show how this image is eventually used to criticize the empowered woman and to suggest a downsized and largely disempowered version of "empowerment" as the right choice for the heroine.

1 *The Devil Wears Prada*: Plot and characters

The Devil Wears Prada tells the coming-of-age story of a young woman, Andy Sachs, who comes to New York after having graduated from university to pursue a career as a journalist there. In lack of another option, she starts to work as an assistant to Miranda Priestly, editor-in-chief of the country's leading fashion magazine "Runway" and an infamous icon in the

fashion scene. Despite her personal disinterest in fashion and the difficulties she encounters at work due to Miranda's tyranny-like regime over her staff, Andy holds on to her job, motivated by the ideal career chances it promises: Having worked for Miranda for one year will, as she is repeatedly told, open all doors for her in the publishing business. After an initial phase of rejection of the ideals and values represented by the magazine, Andy's ambition grows and she develops a stronger commitment to her job, which causes a radical change of her identity – physically, in response to the demands and options of the fashion scene, but also with regard to her character and her priorities. Her behavior becomes more assertive and career-oriented, leading to a conflict with her personal life that ends in a breakup with her boyfriend, while it simultaneously improves her achievements and thus her status at work. In spite of the promising developments in her professional life and a romance with successful journalist Christian that could further boost her career, Andy begins to suffer from the consequences of her changes of character and realizes that her new identity and the lifestyle she has chosen are incompatible with her personality and her values. She eventually quits her job at "Runway" before her year there is over, giving up the chances it would have given her, and instead chooses a return to her original identity a more moderate approach to her career by starting to work at a small local newspaper.

Characters in the film that will be referred to:

Andy (Andrea) Sachs	the heroine; a young journalist
Miranda Priestly	Andy's boss (the "Devil"); editor-in-chief of "Runway"
Nate	Andy's boyfriend
Christian	freelance journalist; has a short affair with Andy
Nigel	fashion director of "Runway"
Lily	Andy's long-time friend

2 Women's freedom in urban spaces

The Devil Wears Prada presents the city as a seemingly unlimited space offering unimpeded freedom to the female characters. This space is set up by aerial establishing shots of the Manhattan skyline and of individual streets and neighborhoods, shot from a distance and angle that capture only a portion of the city, which creates the impression that it goes on in all directions outside of the frame. In addition to the establishing shots, on-location settings in different parts of New York are used in a great number of scenes. By locating the narrative in particular places, marked and made recognizable by architectural or cultural landmarks, the

film maps and structures the territory inhabited by the characters and stresses the notion that they are moving all over the city. To support the image of the women's free movement through the urban space, a sense of mobility is added by the recurring motif of traffic, either as a background for the setting or in form of the town cars and taxis that are permanently used by the characters. Another marker of space and mobility is the motif of walking into and through streets, which is already used in the opening credits in a montage showing a number of women getting ready for the day and entering the city. The editing of the scene suggests that the women are not only moving freely through the urban space but are, in fact, "taking on the city": the cross-cutting of different shots of women stepping out of their houses and onto the streets and pictures of female feet walking across urban ground creates the impression of a female 'invasion'. A strong contrast between the activities of men and women in this scene underlines this idea: While watching the women's morning routine from getting dressed to leaving the house, we see their male partners staying behind in their beds; this implies that it is not, as one might expect, the men but the women that are taking possession of the city. This scene in the opening credits seems to set up the basis of the relationship between the female characters and the urban space they inhabit. The motif of the woman moving through the city appears again and again as we follow Andy on her daily errands for her boss, which take her into various parts of Manhattan. By mapping the city as a large and accessible territory, the film establishes a general impression of the freedom that the city offers. On this basis, it presents a number of other factors that seem to extend the female characters' physical and ideological freedom and stresses the possibility of empowerment through the use of this freedom.

2.1 The freedom and security of invisibility

With regard to the question of women's freedom to move in urban spaces, one interesting aspect of the film is the absence of the particular threats and dangers for women that are usually associated with large cities and have historically, and up to the present, been regarded as one of the main obstacles to women's movement in urban surroundings. Anke Gleber points out that "[i]n regarding women's images and their relation to public space, recent feminist sociology has suggested tendencies towards a "basic asymmetry" in the gendered distribution of physical and psychological power" (62) that renders women the potential victims of various forms of harassment and assault. As a result, women tend to be more cautious and anxious than men and to avoid unnecessary forays into the city, which limits

them in their possibilities to move at will in urban spaces and in their experience of the city in general (cf. Gleber 62).

In *The Devil Wears Prada*, such threats for women do not exist and the female characters are obviously not at all concerned with their security.³ This becomes clear when Andy goes for a walk in the city all alone at night. Watching her walk through the streets of New York City we (especially as a female spectator) almost naturally ask ourselves if she is safe there, aware that her limited physical power might make her an easy target of assault. We might even feel slightly uncomfortable about seeing a woman in such a surrounding without any traces of imminent danger, having been conditioned, by repeated accounts of the dangers potentially awaiting a woman in the dark city, to believe that women should generally avoid entering the city alone at night and that doing so might be regarded as challenging one's fate. However, the film presents the city a completely safe place for Andy. There are no visible threats as the young woman strolls through it reflecting on her life; and there is not even a single look cast at her that might arouse suspicion. Andy obviously does not need to be anxious about potential annoyances or threats of harassment that are a typical source of concern for women in cities as a consequence of a general tendency to associate a woman's solitary presence in a nighttime urban setting with a notion of sexual availability or even prostitution.⁴ She is not faced with any problems of this kind that might result from a misinterpretation of her image and, in fact, even seems to be invisible to the city around her and completely at peace during her walk. The choice of sound effects for this scene contributes to the impression of a safe, peaceful surrounding and adds a sense of Andy's isolation from the urban space around her that might emphasize her invisibility, since the usual noise of the traffic has been removed almost completely and replaced by a quiet, thoughtful song.

In this scene, the only one where we see Andy move through the city alone *and* without a distinct purpose (such as the usual errands for her boss), we might even discover traces of a flaneur figure in her relaxed and aimless way of walking and her contemplative mood. Freedom and invisibility were the basis for the existence of the flaneur, who emerged as a literary as well as an authentic figure in the 19th century in response to the development of urban spaces; his typical activity was to roam the cities of modernity as an observer of metropolitan life.⁵ The physical freedom and security granted to Andy by the city seem to enable her to assume a perspective that has historically been reserved for men. An encounter with the city in terms of flanerie has been impossible for women in the past and is still regarded as unlikely (or even impossible) for women in contemporary urban spaces since the

status of their image as an object to the public gaze denies them the subject status that is the basis for the flaneur's voyeuristic perspective.⁶ With regard to the notion of flanerie that comes up in this scene it is interesting to note that Andy's outfit underlines her femininity less than any other costume we see her in throughout the whole film (see Figure 1). The straight lines and the color combination of her black pants, plain white shirt and black sweater might even suggest a tendency towards a more masculine dressing style. Moreover, the actress's long hair is hidden beneath a cap that contributes to the allusions to masculinity in her outfit. This raises the question if we can conclude that Andy's invisibility, which seems to be at the basis of her free and safe movement through the city, might be related to her costume as a form of male masquerade.



Figure 1: Andy as a female flaneur (*The Devil Wears Prada*, ch. 22).

In an article about women and flanerie in films, Amy Murphy argues that becoming a true flaneur is only possible for women if they assume a male status and perspective of invisibility through masquerade, taking the female flaneur in the film *Roman Holiday* as an example. She reads the change of the character's appearance into a more masculine style (by wearing men's clothes and getting a short haircut) as a masquerade that is a crucial factor in her development into a flaneur figure and points out that "hiding and masquerading have come to be understood as typically MALE characteristics, allowing a man the ability to move through urban space without constraint." (38). Thus, it is the disguise-like allusion to the masculine in the female character's image that enables her to become invisible and experience the city with the freedom of a man's perspective (cf. Murphy 38-39). Taking this into consideration, one might conclude that it is Andy's masculine clothing style as a form of masquerade that grants her the invisibility, and thus the freedom, she obviously enjoys during her walk through the city. The question, then, would be if we can read the scene as an

implication that she could not explore the city in the same way in full expression of her femininity, which would suggest that there might be factors limiting her freedom in public spaces. Although the film, in general, promotes an image of unrestricted freedom for women in the city, there are some moments where this notion has to be questioned as Andy encounters problems that affect her movement in public spaces – not so much in a physical way as on a more internalized or psychological basis. The challenges to Andy's freedom seem to be connected with her image in public spaces and the effects of the public gaze directed at it.

2.2 Women's images in public spaces

With regard to women's presence in public spaces, the relation between the female image and the public and traditionally male gaze is frequently discussed as a central problem in the feminist discourse. As Gleber points out, the positioning of women "as the passively receptive objects and images to a public and active male gaze" (61) throughout history has restricted their freedom in public spaces by denying them the status of a freely moving, actively looking subject. Gleber argues that the effects of this phenomenon are still relevant in women's experience of public spaces: "While the most obvious and explicit restrictions to women's movement have been removed . . . their status as an overdetermined image continues to carry these same socially restrictive and restricting expectations into the present." (63). As a consequence of the object status imposed on them, women's self-perception has been shaped by a permanent awareness of being on display for men to look at. However, women also internalize the male gaze and direct it at themselves, thus judging their own image, as well as other female images, according to male criteria of evaluation. In this way, women become the "objects of their own self-censorship" (Gleber 75) due to their permanent assessment of their own and each other's images independently from the presence or absence of an actual male gaze. The result is a permanent subjection of women – passively as well as actively – to a critical evaluation and judgment in public (cf. Gleber 75), a process through which, as Buck-Morss criticizes, women contribute actively to restricting their freedom and turning themselves into objects by "viewing [themselves] as constantly being viewed" (125), even if the situation does not put them on display for anyone to look at.

In *The Devil Wears Prada*, the male gaze at the female image, although it occurs in a number of scenes, cannot be said to be restrictive or particularly problematic to the female characters' freedom to move in the city. What appears more interesting in the film is the relation between the public gaze as internalized and exerted by women and its effects on

Andy's status and development in her use of public spaces. This public gaze, however, does not affect Andy as much in the city itself as it does in her professional surroundings. From the moment she arrives at the "Runway" editorial offices, it becomes clear that she is entering a public sphere in which appearance is the major issue of concern. As a newcomer to this fashion-obsessed world she immediately becomes a curious sight for the staff. All eyes are permanently on her, observing her movements and evaluating her appearance critically. The processes of being on display and subjected to a critical gaze that mark Andy's experience at the "Runway" editorial offices seem to bear a strong resemblance to those that are at work in the female encounter with public urban spaces as it is presented in the feminist discourse. This impression is stressed by a number of allusions to and connections with the city that can be found in the design of the setting for the offices. It seems that the problem of women's image and the public gaze can be traced in the film on the level of the office and the "Runway" magazine as a metaphor for the public space of the city.

"Runway" - the magazine as well as the term in general - represents the fashion world and the display of female bodies as one of its most typical elements. Gleber argues that "the runway of a fashion show [presents] the small-scale model of an artificial 'street'" (69) and suggests that the models' movement on a runway can be compared to women's movement in public as it carries the same meanings in terms of being exposed to a public gaze.⁷ In the film, it is not only models that are displayed in runway-related situations, such as fashion shows, previews and run-throughs. The women who work at the magazine's editorial offices also move and present themselves in a similar way while flaunting the latest fashion. It seems that at "Runway" the female characters are on display in a way that can be compared to the display of female bodies in public spaces in general. A comparison of the "Runway" editorial offices with the city also suggests itself due to its setting. The labyrinthine hallways of the building and the constant, hectic movement of the characters (and at times large numbers of extras) through them evoke an atmosphere of claustrophobia and anonymity often associated with crowded city streets. Moreover, there is a strong presence of the city even inside the building, especially in Miranda's office. Behind Miranda's desk, we can see the city and its skyscrapers through three large windows. Even when the windows are not directly visible in the picture, the buildings outside can still be seen reflected in a mirror next to the desk. Since Miranda is usually shown sitting or standing at her desk with her back towards the windows, her character is constantly framed by and connected with the city's skyscrapers. In the image of the city used as a background here, the idea of power seems to be conveyed by the architecture and the associations typically made with it. As Wilson points out, "[t]he city is

'masculine' in its triumphal scale, its towers and vistas" (7). This connection with masculine characteristics of the city adds a sense of dominance and superiority to Miranda's character and stresses her position of power within the office visually. Due to its colors, mostly cold greys, the office resembles the buildings outside; at times the two spaces seem to melt into each other in the background. Interestingly, Miranda's colors – her clothes, her pale skin and her grey hair and eye shadow – also frequently blend in with the colors outside the windows, which might emphasize the association of her character and her office with the city. Andy is frequently summoned to the office and faced with this image of Miranda in her position of power, backed up by the city. In such situations, especially in the first part of the film, Miranda usually scrutinizes Andy with a highly critical gaze, which creates the impression that Miranda represents the city's eyes and the public gaze at Andy (see Figure 2).



Figure 2: Miranda's critical gaze at Andy (*The Devil Wears Prada*, ch. 3).

The effects of this gaze as a factor restricting Andy's freedom quickly become obvious. In the first minutes of the film, Andy is presented as a self-confident young woman caring little about her appearance and her image in the eyes of others. However, as soon as she enters into the sphere of "Runway" and is met by Miranda's gaze, Andy begins to internalize this gaze and direct it at herself, self-consciously examining her own image in relation to the normative image reflected by Miranda's criteria of evaluation. Due to her critical gaze, Miranda exerts power over Andy's presence, which strongly affects the young woman's movement in the office. The following scene, taking place during Andy's first day at work, illustrates this process: Andy is in Miranda's office, taking a number of orders from her before being dismissed. As she is leaving the room, Miranda calls her back and Andy turns around nervously, her body language already expressing a certain anxiety. Without a word, Miranda examines her with a look of contempt and the camera follows her gaze, tilting down

across Andy's body. Miranda's gaze as a silent judgment immediately makes it clear that Andy's image is unacceptable in her surroundings. Andy looks down at herself self-consciously and with a certain surprise, as if becoming aware of her own image and her being on display that very moment. While under Miranda's gaze, Andy's face and body language express a strong sense of unease (see Figure 3) and when finally released from the gaze, she literally flees from the office with hurried and nervous movements.

The occurrence and consequences of the critical gaze on Andy in this scene can be compared to the restricting effects of the gaze at women's image on their presence in public as it is described by Gleber. Miranda, having internalized the male criteria of evaluation of female images (and due to her position as the editor-in-chief of a fashion magazine probably an expert on the judgment of female images), uses this gaze on Andy, turning Andy into an object on display. Andy becomes aware of the gaze that is directed at her and of her being on display; she internalizes the gaze to view herself the way she is seen by Miranda and begins to assess her own image by the same criteria. Since her awareness of being looked at increases her anxiety about being looked at, she loses much of her natural self-confidence and her relaxed manner and treats her own image more and more critically from this moment on. Being subjected to Miranda's controlling gaze and censoring her own image according to it obviously restricts Andy in her freedom to move at will and without permanent unease about being looked at and judged in the office. Interestingly, Miranda's control over Andy's movement even seems to extend out of the office and into the actual city. Andy, who in private situations usually walks through the city in a relaxed way, ends up stumbling through the streets clumsily and with some difficulty every time she is out on an errand for her boss, as if the mere awareness of moving within the sphere controlled by Miranda's power would limit her freedom even if her boss is not physically present but only talking to her through her cell phone (see Figure 4).



Figure 3: Andy under Miranda's gaze (*The Devil Wears Prada*, ch. 6).



Figure 4: Miranda's extended control (*The Devil Wears Prada*, ch. 7).

Since the "Runway" office, due to its particular setting and the gaze that prevails there, seems to be, to some extent, representative of public spaces, the problems Andy encounters in her professional surroundings might be read as reflecting the restrictive effects of women's object status on their movement in urban spaces in general. However, the film does not leave Andy in her powerless status as a victim of Miranda's controlling gaze but instead presents a solution that seems to catapult her into a more empowered position by a change of her image – literally – and of her status in relation to the critical public gaze. For this process, which can be read as the creation of a new public identity, the freedom and the possibilities for the expression of individuality that are typical of urban life and its consumer-oriented character are suggested as a basis.

2.3 Individual freedom and public identity

In the general concept of freedom typically associated with the city, the individual freedom for personal expression seems to play an important role. As Joanne Entwistle points out, "[t]he anonymity of the city opens up new possibilities for creating oneself, giving one the freedom to experiment with appearance in a way that would have been unthinkable in a traditional rural community" (quoted in Bruzzi and Gibson 117). This aspect of the city's liberating potential seems to be one of the key factors for Andy's empowerment as it enables her to actively choose and change her own image through a new form of expressing herself publicly, which helps her overcome the restrictions to her freedom by disempowering the critical gaze at her image. The film links this process of shaping a public identity closely with

the freedom for individual expression and the options for personal reinvention that are presented as typical of New York City due to its status as one of the world's fashion centers.

In her analysis of the creation of female public identities in *Sex and the City*, Susan Zieger takes Michael Warner's work on the bourgeois public sphere as a basis for her assumption that one potential problem with regard to women's presence in public spaces lies in the notion that an individual's possibility of being an "abstractable, universal citizen" (97) – and thus 'invisible' in public – depends, among other factors, on gender. From Warner's argument that "the bourgeois public sphere . . . provides a privilege for unmarked identities: the male, the white, the middle class, the normal." (quoted in Zieger 97), Zieger concludes that women, marked in their identity as female, are denied "the unmarked position of the abstractable, ideal citizen" (97). Applying this theory to *Sex and the City*, Zieger demonstrates how life in New York City enables the female characters to shape a public identity in line with, and even based on, their femininity – that is, their 'otherness' in relation to the unmarked citizen (cf. Zieger 98). As mentioned earlier, shopping has historically been regarded as one means for women to gain access to public spaces. Zieger stresses another aspect of shopping that is important with regard to the question of women's presence in public, stating that "unlike traditional participation in the public sphere, shopping is a way of being in public that allows women to preserve and even flaunt their difference" (98). The individual consumption of fashion, and of a particular urban lifestyle in general, thus becomes an instance of creating a distinct public identity. Zieger relates this process to John Hartley's concept of "DIY [Do It Yourself] Citizenship" (98), a form of citizenship that is enacted through "becoming visible to others as a self-styled individual consumer" (98) as opposed to the traditional, abstract citizen's participation in public life that is denied to marked identities.

What appears to be the key point here is the act of a person, marked in her identity by her 'otherness', creating a public identity based on her individuality through an individual choice from among the options provided by urban life. Such a development can also be found in Andy's response to the negative 'public' reaction to her difference from the norm at the "Runway" office. When Andy decides to reject the victim status she has been cast into at work and to take steps to regain control over her presence there, she creates a new look by choosing a different clothing style and a new haircut and make-up, drawing from the various sources for personal reinvention through fashion that her metropolitan surroundings provide. In terms of DIY Citizenship one could say that, in adopting a new style, Andy defines a new identity by becoming publicly visible as a consumer of a particular fashion style and also expressing herself as such in her own, individual way. At first sight Andy might appear to

simply be adapting to the normative image prescribed by her surroundings because she has no other choice; however, she chooses to do so not out of mere necessity but motivated by her ambition to reach a more powerful status and to have better chances for getting ahead (as opposed to turning her back on her professional environment – a solution that is repeatedly suggested by other characters). Thus, it is her active and individual choice of a particular lifestyle which she regards as best for herself that lies at the basis of the creation of her new identity.

Although such a process is certainly not restricted to New York as a particular location, the film's use of its setting suggests that it is the city's unique character that makes Andy's development possible. As Zieger notes about *Sex and the City*, "the series glamorises its location, New York City, as the centre of public reinvention and display. While fashion can be recreated in other places, by filming on location *Sex and the City* creates New York itself as a physical space to be consumed" (98). Since the emphasis on typical and famous locations in New York City, in combination with constant product placement and references to brand names, is a recurring motif in *The Devil Wears Prada*, the notion of the city as a glamorized "physical space to be consumed" certainly comes up in the film as well. In linking Andy's transformation to the options of a lifestyle that is presented as typical of New York, film obviously draws on the city's reputation as tolerant and thus liberating in terms of personal expression. By choosing from the options the city offers to her and using them to her advantage, Andy finds a way to make her image more resistant to the public gaze. In this way she places herself in a more empowered position within the public sphere, which increases her freedom as it enables her to meet the public gaze without being restricted by it in her status and movement.

This is proven in the film when Andy makes her entry in the scene following her physical transformation, which shows how her new identity affects her perception of herself as well as the view of her image by others. Shot in slow motion, Andy enters the office with a smile of superiority and triumph. She walks self-confidently and throws back her hair, obviously enjoying the admiring looks she gets from her two stunned colleagues (see Figure 5). Although Andy is still in the position of an object that is being looked at, in this case examined closely by two other women, their critical gaze now seems to have lost its power to control or restrict Andy since she has chosen her image in a way she is obviously strongly confident about and satisfied with. The loss of power on the side of the colleagues is also expressed verbally: their animated and chat about Andy being "a complete and utter disaster" (*The Devil Wears Prada*, ch. 13) falls silent as she enters the office and the two women begin

to stutter and have difficulty in finding the words to comment on Andy's new look. Andy's self-confidence is reinforced when her colleagues eventually, although with some reluctance, have to admit that her new appearance is a complete success. Her new identity also affects her status in relation to Miranda's controlling gaze. The first time Andy is confronted with her boss after her transformation, she seems to wait for Miranda's judgment excitedly rather than anxiously. Interestingly, the two women's positions in the office are reversed in that moment: Andy is standing at Miranda's desk – in Miranda's usual position of power – with the windows and the city in her back while Miranda enters the office. This image might underline the shift of power in the relation between the two characters. Miranda, although still scrutinizing Andy from head to toe, does so with an expression of respect and appreciation and Andy struts out of the office in triumph. Miranda's gaze at Andy now seems to have empowering qualities rather than restrictive ones, which might be reflected in the fact that, from this scene on, Miranda generally treats Andy with more respect and gives her more responsibilities. This improves Andy's working conditions and makes it easier for her to use and prove her skills, and eventually leads to a promotion.⁸

Having gone through the process of reinventing her public identity, Andy appears to be empowered both in a psychological and in a material way. Due to her increased self-confidence about her image, she is now able to meet the critical gaze and deny it the power it used to have over her, which enables her to move freely and without permanent anxiety about being looked at. Andy's self-confidence does not only increase her personal freedom in the office, but also has an effect on her movement on the streets of the city. In a montage introducing the 'new' Andy, which shows her in the city in a number of different outfits that illustrate her new image, she is walking in the middle of the street instead of being squeezed and pushed along crowded sidewalks the way she was before. Her relaxed and elegant movements stand in sharp contrast to the hectic clumsiness that was characteristic of her earlier errands into the city (see Figures 4 and 6). The new identity she has created seems to have the same liberating and empowering effect on her both in the city and, on a metaphoric level, in the public space represented by the "Runway" office.



Figure 5: Andy's new identity in the office (*The Devil Wears Prada*, ch. 13).



Figure 6: Andy's new identity in the streets (*The Devil Wears Prada*, ch. 13).

With regard to Andy's new identity and the possibilities of individual expression provided by the city, the costume in the flaneur scene that has brought up the question about possible restrictions to her freedom and movement in the urban space might also allow for a different interpretation. Since the scene occurs some time after Andy's transformation, the outfit could be read as an example of her new look as part of the identity she has chosen; as such the outfit's meaning would suggest an individual fashion statement that goes beyond the notion of dressing up in a male disguise. Two elements to support this view are certainly the eye-catching pearl necklace Andy is wearing as well as her extravagant purse, both being items that definitely underline instead of hide her femininity. Since the city, as presented in the film, does not hold any threats or dangers that would make it necessary for Andy to hide her femininity, the outfit is certainly put on by individual choice rather than by necessity. The fact that a female character is able to choose a masculine clothing style while remaining undoubtedly within the framework of contemporary women's fashion might be regarded as an additional implication of empowerment, as it seems to add a meaning to her image that, in a historical context, is related to a male status in public spaces as one form of expressing her feminine identity.

As the development of Andy's image and status shows, *The Devil Wears Prada* creates the impression that the urban experience empowers Andy due to the freedom it gives her. The city provides possibilities for individual choices that enable her to deal with the challenges that seem to originate from the traditional status of women's images in relation to public spaces. The different forms of freedom she finds in the city are presented as giving her the chance to retain control over her own image and to place herself in a more empowered

position within the urban world. Another important factor in the film's concept of the city as a site of empowerment is the typical urban lifestyle that seems to provide the female characters with a variety of options for their private and professional lives.

3 Urban life

In an analysis of the city's role in *Sex and the City*, Diane Negra describes the series' image of New York as a "luxurious lifestyle blueprint poised to compete with suburban domesticity" that is created by locating the series in "a world of cutting-edge urban style" (par. 2). *The Devil Wears Prada* draws a similar picture of the city⁹ since it locates the narrative explicitly in its particular urban setting by using a high amount of material shot on location with an emphasis on recognizable landmarks and connects it with a number of indicators of luxurious urban life, for example by mentioning authentic names of prestigious hotels, restaurants or public locations. Although the city is not directly contrasted with the suburban world due to the lack of a suburban setting, the film emphasizes the options that modern urban life provides for women with regard to a greater freedom for the choice of lifestyle; these options seem to be an advantage of the city compared to the more rigid norms and limited possibilities for women that are usually associated with the suburb. Life in the city seems to have a certain potential for empowering women since the physical move away from suburban, domestic spaces also implies a break with traditional gender roles that place women in the private sphere of the home rather than in public spheres.

Feminists have pointed out that the development of urban and suburban spaces brought about the emergence of an ideology of separate spheres for men and women "in which the public domain of the urban center was both deeply masculine and associated with social, economic, and political power. Conversely, the suburb came to be associated with middle-class domesticity, femininity, and dependence" (Bondi 161). Although it is emphasized that this distinction has come to exist more on an ideological basis than in real life, the notion of the city and the public sphere as the male domain and the suburb and the private sphere as the female domain has had, and continues to have, an effect on women's use of public spaces and the judgments made about it (cf. Bondi 162). However, a number of critics¹⁰ have argued in favor of an abandonment of public/private and male/female dichotomies stating that "dominant conceptions of public and private domains are . . . increasingly outdated and irrelevant to the lives of women and men" (Bondi 164) since it is not always possible to mark spaces used in everyday life distinctly 'public' or 'private'. Consequently, the borders between the two spheres seem to blur and the association of

particular gender roles with each sphere becomes less rigid and definite. This might be the case especially in lives taking place completely in the city, where the domestic and the public sphere are often not clearly separable in terms of space.

In *The Devil Wears Prada*, the use of setting seems to illustrate the blurring of the boundaries between the two spheres. Moreover, the female characters use public spaces more often than private ones as a result of living and working in the city and are little, if at all, associated with domestic life. As a consequence, the film suggests a loosening and redistribution of the gender roles that have traditionally been associated with the spheres. This seems to contribute to the women's empowerment as it gives them greater freedom to choose from different lifestyles and options in organizing their professional and private lives and to live independently from men and outside of traditional households. However, the effects of the ideological placement of women in domestic rather than urban and public spaces can also be traced in the film's image of women in urban life since it hints at the perception of empowered femininity in urban spaces as a source of concern and conflict.

3.1 Private and public spaces

In the film, the characters' private spaces are created within the larger urban space. The impression of blurring boundaries between the domestic and the public sphere is emphasized visually by the connection of private moments in the plot with public spaces through the choice of urban settings. This effect seems to be an important motif for defining the characteristics of urban life since is repeatedly used throughout the film and already shows up in the opening credits. At the beginning of the film, we see an establishing shot of Manhattan; afterwards the camera pans across the facades of city buildings, seen through a window, until it reveals a woman standing at the window and putting on her underwear while looking out across the city. The public sphere of the city and the woman's private sphere literally melt into each other as the camera focus shifts from the building outside the window to the woman's body. Close-ups of her bare skin and her lingerie increase the sense of privacy in that moment, especially through the contrast with the buildings. In the next frame, the woman's bedroom is revealed in the background; the sequence of the three images (the city, the woman, the bedroom) implies that the two spaces overlap due to the woman's simultaneous presence in both of them. The large window towards the city underlines the impression that the private space is not separated from the city but embedded in it. Similarly, windows revealing a view of the city are present in other scenes of women and their morning rituals in the opening sequence. The cross-cutting of a number of these scenes suggests a close

proximity of the domestic and the public sphere as a common feature of urban life; this notion is repeatedly reinforced throughout the film by the use of an establishing shot of the city for a scene taking place in a private sphere inside a home.

However, the effect is not only achieved by making the city visible in private spheres but also by taking the characters' private lives out into the urban world, which creates the impression that the characters (and the female ones in particular) are claiming parts of the city as new or additional private spaces. By presenting Andy's personal life as taking place mostly in public spaces instead of her home, the film suggests that she is, in fact, 'at home' in the city; the two spheres could hardly overlap more. When we first see Andy with her friends, they sit in a restaurant, where wine and candlelight as well as the dialog create a private, homelike atmosphere into which the urban surrounding that is present throughout the whole scene behind the restaurant's large windows seems to melt almost naturally. After leaving the restaurant, Andy and her boyfriend walk down a street at night while having a private conversation and eventually kiss in the middle of the street. They do not take notice of the city around them, nor do they seem to care that their private moment takes place in an openly public space. Later in the film when Andy and Nate break up, it also happens in the middle of a dark city street, as much 'in public' as it could possibly be instead of, as one might expect, in a more secluded and private setting. Scenes like these, that present the characters' living spaces as simultaneously public and private, contribute to the impression that the public and private spheres blend with each other in the city .

The film's use of settings suggests that, in the city, the traditional domestic sphere loses much of its function, which is also implicit in the fact that typical domestic rituals are taken out of it and placed in an urban location. Although the characters, for example, are frequently shown eating, it only happens inside a home once; apart from that, eating takes place exclusively in public spaces such as restaurants, the office or the streets. Since domestic rituals and private moments are not associated with the domestic sphere in particular, and new private spaces are created within public ones, a separation of the two spheres in terms of a public/private dichotomy is difficult to apply to the film's urban world. The traditional distribution of spaces with the (urban) public being the male domain and the (suburban) domestic and private being the female domain does not exist here. This seems to contribute to female characters' ideological and actual freedom with regard to their role and status as they, living in the city, are obviously less likely to be expected to remain within the domestic sphere they would traditionally be assigned to. Instead, they continuously cross the borders as they move between the spheres and challenge the male dominance in public spaces, which

becomes obvious in particular in their superiority in number and their success in the professional world (which will be discussed below).

As a consequence of the blurring of the boundaries between the two spheres the gender roles associated with them obviously cease to be clearly defined. The film almost seems to suggest a reversal of the traditional gender roles since there is a tendency towards the domestic world being represented by male characters while the female characters hardly have a share in it. A striking example for a male domestic figure is certainly Andy's boyfriend Nate. In addition to his telling profession – he is a chef and as such repeatedly shown in a kitchen – he is the one who brings home the groceries, does the cooking and waits for his girlfriend to return from work late at night. All of these activities are, in general, more likely to be associated with a woman's role in a family or relationship rather than with a man's. In contrast to this, Andy and the other female characters are rarely shown in their homes; and even if they are there, we frequently see them still in their work outfits and finishing the day's work or at least talking about it. They are not at all concerned with household-related issues, which appears to be a break with their traditional female role. This redistribution of gender roles might underline the notion of urban life as empowering women by freeing them from the restrictive status typically assigned to them due to their association with the domestic sphere and enabling them to explore a wider range of options in their lives. The options for women in the city presented in the film include the possibility of reaching leading positions in the professional world as well as the choice from among a number of models of personal lifestyle that differ from traditional family households.

3.2 Women in urban professional life

The advantages of life in the city, in comparison to the suburban world, also become obvious in the film's image of the female characters' professional world, which is presented as promising self-actualization, success and a glamorous lifestyle. Locating a narrative based on women's experience of urban work life in New York City appears to be a trend in recent films. According to Negra, in recent years, "big budget and independent chick flicks"¹¹ alike have used New York as the setting for professional ambition" (par. 15), a choice that may be influenced by the city's reputation as one of the country's leading financial and cultural centers (cf. Negra, par. 2). Conjuring up this image of New York City in the spectator's mind – as opposed to others we might know of the city as a site of urban misery – requires the creation of a certain atmosphere by showing parts of the city that represent financial power and glamour. *The Devil Wears Prada* does so by repeatedly using images of financial centers,

such as Lower Manhattan, and commercially and culturally important landmarks such as Fifth Avenue and Broadway as well as by placing Andy in trendy SoHo lofts, Upper East Side town houses and luxury hotels, in chauffeur-driven town cars and on red carpets of social events with a taste of high society. Andy moves through these spaces mostly without taking notice of their glamour, concerned only with the challenges of her job, which creates the impression that everyday urban work life naturally takes place in such a setting associated with money, success and a luxurious middle class environment. Interestingly, these locations are the only ones used in the film for rendering a picture of the city's professional world, in which all women are making careers in trend sectors such as the fashion or publishing industry. In other, less glamorous workplaces where women would typically be found, they are almost completely invisible. Despite Andy's permanent errands to coffee shops and fashion stores we never see a clerk; even in the late night and early morning hours at work she never meets an office cleaner; and at the restaurants and bars frequented by the characters, one can spot a waitress only upon closer examination.

It is at this point, at the latest, that the film's image of women's professional lives takes on slightly utopian traces; this notion is enhanced by an attempt to create the illusion that the urban professional world is, in fact, dominated by women. The staff at the editorial office of the "Runway" magazine consists almost exclusively of women (apart from one strongly stereotyped homosexual man). This female dominance in the staff might not be too much of a surprise since "Runway" is 'only' a fashion magazine; however, the film hastens to point out that "Runway" stands for serious business, financial power and cultural influence in the city as well as internationally and that the women there are hard-working and successful professionals. Miranda, the editor-in-chief of "Runway", represents the successful career woman and the idea of a female dominance in the professional world. Although the magazine's financial resources are controlled by a male authority represented by the chairman of the publishing company, he obviously plays the inferior part in his continuous power struggle with Miranda. Despite his efforts to exert influence on important decisions concerning the publication and money matters and his attempts to drive Miranda out of her position, she outwits him with the help of clever scheming and the network of power and support she has built up in the fashion world and is able to retain both her job and the power over "Runway", while he is reduced to the function of financing 'her' magazine. Miranda, in her position as the editor-in-chief of an influential fashion magazine, does not only dominate her immediate professional surroundings but also seems to be the ultimate authority in the national fashion scene since her power to promote or destroy designers and labels is

repeatedly stressed throughout the narrative. Due to her unusual position of power that is based on her achievements as well as on her reputation as a tough and demanding boss and critic, Miranda is associated with typically male characteristics, which is emphasized when Andy says about her: "Okay, she's tough. But if Miranda were a man, no one would notice *anything* about her except how great she is at her job" (*The Devil Wears Prada*, ch. 28), implying that Miranda is doing a 'man's job'. With regard to her status in the professional world, Miranda's character might be another example for the shift away from stereotypical gender roles that seems to be brought about by the increasing chances for women in the city to leave their traditional domestic domains because she has successfully made a career in a professional surrounding that is obviously still considered a male domain.

Since the film places the female characters in a world of seemingly idealized careers and career prospects, the notion of empowerment in terms of self-actualization and the possibility to assume a (traditionally male) position of success and financial power becomes obvious. This image of women's professional lives seems to reflect the argument that, in a contemporary urban surrounding, the spheres and gender roles that have traditionally been associated with men and women cease to have an influence on people's everyday lives. That this is not only the case with regard to women's participation in the professional world but also in their personal lives can be seen in the different models of personal lifestyle that are presented in the film.

3.3 Urban lifestyle and empowered femininity

In contrast to suburban spaces that tend to be dominated by traditional social structures, cities offer a "greater tolerance of living arrangements that differ from the standard nuclear-family household" (Bondi 165). As a consequence, urban life has come to be regarded as emancipating women as it provides an environment that allows for the expression of diversity, which enables them to choose from a variety of lifestyles and options for organizing their social lives (cf. Wilson 10, Bondi 165). *The Devil Wears Prada* emphasizes this view of the city through the characters that represent a range of different lifestyles.¹² Andy's development, which implies the idea of choice, covers a steady relationship with Nate, single life, a short affair with Christian and, at the end of the film, a return to single life with a high probability for her relationship with Nate to be revived. Miranda represents the option of marriage, motherhood and family life, although not in the most traditional way since we get to know towards the end of the film that neither her marriage nor the upcoming divorce are her first. Despite the personal tragedy this means for her and her daughters, the divorce does not affect

her social status since her professional success certainly guarantees her the financial independence to live as a single mother. A number of minor characters, who are not explicitly defined in terms of relationship, might either be regarded as single or as a hint that marital status is not a particularly important factor in classifying them as participants of modern urban life. The possibility of a non-heterosexual relationship, although ignored with regard to the women in the film, is alluded to in the presence of one homosexual male character.¹³ As this range of lifestyles and the relatively unproblematic transition – at least in Andy's case – from one to another show, the film creates its image of urban life as a mosaic of different options for women to choose from that offers alternatives to traditional family life.

One particular aspect of life in the city that appears important in the film is the notion of empowerment of femininity and female sexuality through the urban lifestyle. As Wilson points out, "[t]he city offers untrammelled sexual experience; in the city the forbidden . . . becomes possible" (6) for both men and women. The sexual permissiveness that urban life is typically associated with might allow for a liberation of women from their traditionally inferior status in relation to male desire and patriarchal control and give them a chance to be more assertive in pursuing their own desires.¹⁴ The idea of women's sexual empowerment through an urban lifestyle is presented in the film as more general statement as well as in the development of Andy's character. As a general message, it shows up in the scene from which the statement quoted earlier – "The modern woman unleashes the animal within to take on the big city" (*The Devil Wears Prada*, ch. 19) – is taken. In addition to indicating freedom in general, the phrase "unleashes the animal within" can certainly also be understood as female sexuality freed, or in the act of freeing itself, from patriarchal control, which would add another level of empowerment to the others that are present in the film. The scene shows a fashion photo shoot in Central Park that seems to celebrate the idea of unleashed femininity. Since the motto of the photo shoot is "Urban Jungle", the models are all dressed in animal print or fur outfits, have wild hairstyles and wear wildlife-inspired masks (see Figure 7).



Figure 7: "Unleashing the animal within" (*The Devil Wears Prada*, ch. 19).

The connotations of power are numerous in the scene: Although the cut and the fabrics of the models' costumes, as well as the amount of bare skin they reveal, underline their femininity, the women are at the same time associated with powerful wild animals due to the animal prints imitating tiger and leopard fur. These outfits, especially in connection with the models' aggressive postures, create an impression of the women as predators which might also refer to their sexuality since, as Bruzzi and Gibson note about costumes in mainstream Hollywood cinema, "strident colours, big jewellery, tactile fabrics, sheer garments and contoured clothes demarcate the woman as sexual predator" (121). In addition to the visual effect, the fashion director's comment towards Andy, "Don't make me feed you to one of the models" (*The Devil Wears Prada*, ch. 19), also alludes to the idea of the savage and predatory woman. The predator metaphor implies the idea of eating instead of being eaten, of being on top of the food chain. Thus, with regard to the question of empowerment, the phrase "the modern woman unleashes the animal within" in connection with the image could be read as women setting out to take whatever they desire, in the urban world in general as well as in their private lives. Details of the photo shoot, such as the living snake and the whip that are used as accessories, seem to underline the association of femininity with power since they, read as phallic symbols, might add masculine connotations of dominance and a more sexually aggressive behavior to the image of femininity that is created in the scene.

On the other hand, this image also seems to reflect negative views of femininity in urban surroundings that are, according to Wilson, connected with the notion of sexual permissiveness as typical of the urban experience. As she points out, women's presence in cities has always carried ambivalent meanings since the expectations of sexual adventure it raised also implied the uncontrollability of female sexuality. Consequently, femininity came

to be regarded as potentially disruptive to the patriarchic public order and thus was perceived as a threat (cf. Wilson 6). The unease about women's sexuality in connection with the city is implicit in the photo shoot scene, in particular in the wildlife allusions of the models' outfits. Apart from the notion of power, the association of women with predators and the idea of "unleashing the animal" certainly also creates an impression of femininity as uncontrollable and threatening, which is be heightened by the eccentric masks the models are wearing that seem to distort their femininity and render it mysterious and dangerous. With their exotic masquerade, the women appear out of place in their environment: despite the natural (or pseudo-natural) surroundings of Central Park, the buildings of the city in the background emphasize the urban setting, in which the models literally appear disruptive due to the disturbing elements of their costumes. With regard to the two most apparent themes in the photo shoot – the construction of an "unleashed" and empowered type of femininity and the negative associations that inevitably seem to be provoked by this image – the scene might reflect the status of femininity in the urban world that is influenced by the notion of urban life as liberating women in terms of sexuality and by the concerns idea seems to cause.

In the film, this empowered but potentially problematic kind of femininity can also be seen as represented by Andy in her relationship with Christian since her taking the liberty to express her desire seems to hold a certain potential for controversy. She obviously feels attracted to Christian from the moment they first meet and does not hide her interest, although she first hesitates to accept his offers because of her relationship with Nate. Nevertheless, she flirts with Christian on several occasions and, immediately after her temporary breakup with Nate, spends a night with him in Paris towards the end of the film. In the audio commentary of the film (ch. 29), the director mentions that the question whether Andy should have an affair with Christian or not had been an issue of considerable discussion among the crew since there had been a concern that Andy's sexually assertive behavior might harm the character's 'good girl' image and be met with disapproval by the audience. What appears interesting about this consideration is the underlying assumption that Andy's actions could provoke a negative reaction as it seems to reflect the unease about female sexuality being out of (patriarchal) control in the city described by Wilson. The potential threat of Andy breaking out of the 'order' by giving up a more traditional, marriage-like relationship in favor of pursuing a sexual adventure seems to be reformulated as a question about her morality. The issue of morality, that is obviously at the basis of the filmmakers' concern about Andy's affair, is also dealt with in another scene about Andy and Christian that seems to illustrate the judgment of women's moral behavior in urban spaces.

The scene, in which Andy and Christian meet by chance in an art gallery shortly before Andy's breakup with Nate, takes place indoors but is implicitly located in an urban surrounding by the design of the setting. For an artist's show, the gallery's brick walls are covered with huge black and white photographs of urban scenes, which creates the impression that Andy is, in fact, standing in the middle of a city. The lighting of the scene, illuminating only individual spots on the photographs and leaving shadowy places and corners everywhere in the gallery, and the music with urban-inspired sound effects create a gloomy urban atmosphere. Andy is standing in this artificial city studying the pictures while Christian watches her from the shadows and eventually sneaks around a corner to approach her. The motif of seduction that comes through in their dialog is emphasized visually by the way both Christian and the camera circle Andy. Before he leaves, Christian kisses Andy on the cheek. Although Andy appears rather passive in the scene and even gives Christian the impression that he has no chance to seduce her, the mere circumstances of their conversation arouse the suspicion of Andy's friend Lily who harshly criticizes her as immoral, calling her a "glamazon who skulks around in corners with some random, hot fashion guy" (*The Devil Wears Prada*, ch. 24) and implies that she might be cheating on her boyfriend. This rather unjustified judgment of Andy's behavior as immoral and the fact that a close friend of Andy's, who certainly knows about her moral integrity, draws this connection between Andy's encounter with a man in a dark corner of a 'city' and the notion of something objectionable going on there shows how deeply ingrained the perception of female sexuality as dubious and uncontrollable seems to be in the image of the woman in the city.

This scene appears to mark a turning point in the film's perspective on Andy's empowerment. Apart from Andy's friend Lily who turns her back on her, alienated by her lack of understanding for Andy's behavior, Nate also distances himself from her immediately afterwards by ending their relationship. He, too, states that he does not approve of the changes in Andy's character. Due to being blamed for this negative turn in her personal relationships, Andy begins to gradually lose her 'good girl' image, especially since she does not make any efforts to reach a reconciliation with Lily and Nate. Instead, she focuses on her job and leaves for Paris with Miranda to attend the fashion weeks (an event that is said to almost certainly boost her career) and spends a night with Christian there, obviously not at all suffering – as one might expect – from her breakup with Nate. Andy's decision to pursue both her career aspirations and her private desires independently from the opinions of others appears to be the ultimate proof of her empowerment. However, in doing so she turns against the people she shares her life with, which is presented as a negative turn in her character. In the last part

(starting with the breakup and the departure for Paris) the film obviously argues against Andy's decision by dwelling on the negative consequences and the disillusion it brings for her. This becomes clear in the development of the narrative with regard to her relationship with Christian. Although the filmmakers' decision to include the affair in the plot despite the concern about potentially negative audience reactions appears to be an argument in favor of empowered female sexuality as it implies that Andy should have the right to act according to her desire, the 'morning after' presents the situation in a different light. After waking up in Christian's hotel room, Andy realizes that he cannot be trusted and is not the person she had expected him to be.¹⁵ This turn in the narrative, completed by the hurried departure of a disappointed and frustrated Andy, suggests that she has been misled by the options that were open to her and blinded by her desire. That neither this sexual adventure nor her ambitious commitment to her career are the right decisions for her is suggested in the conflict Andy finds herself in as a result of the course she has chosen. In trying to overcome the crisis her development is leading her into, Andy eventually encounters the limits of empowerment.

4 The empowered woman meets her limits

The problems that Andy has to deal with towards the end of the film are, basically, a result of the conflict between the behavior expected from her (as expressed by others but also as internalized by herself) and her own plans and wishes that emerges as a consequence of her emancipated involvement in urban life. Her assertive behavior and her ambition prioritizing career over private life destroy her relationship with Nate and alienate her friends and family. This conflict is summed up by fashion director Nigel during the photo shoot scene discussed earlier in a response to Andy's complaint that her personal life is "hanging by a thread": "That happens when you start doing well at work, darling. Let me know when your whole life goes up in smoke. That means it's time for a promotion." (*The Devil Wears Prada*, ch. 19). What this statement suggests is that Andy's choice is inevitably an either/or decision – "work" or "life" – and that having both a successful career and a fulfilling personal life is impossible for her. Her approach to arranging her life and achieving professional success appears incompatible with her female identity and the expectations typically associated with it, which leads her personal life into a crisis. At this point, Andy seems to have come to the limits of her freedom and empowerment, since the film suggests that she can only overcome this crisis by choosing between two options and that this choice will inevitably exclude one of her options in favor of the other. In the way Andy's options, and eventually her decision, are presented, the film's perspective on the empowered woman in relation to the feminine ideal is revealed.

4.1 The ideal of femininity: the empowered woman vs. the 'good girl'

In creating the conflict Andy is faced with, the film obviously reflects a view of the empowered woman that has become popular in recent years and that challenges the idea of women's empowerment. Influenced by the so-called "family values" promoted by American right-wing policy and a tendency in popular culture to create an ideal of femininity in terms of marriage and motherhood, a wide-spread criticism of the female professional choosing self-actualization outside her expected female (and typically domestic) role has emerged (cf. Negra, pars. 3-4; Jones 10-11). This way of thinking, which is frequently referred to as "anti-feminist backlash",¹⁶ is seen as a reaction to the "social and political shifts in American culture that undermine the paternalist ideology of the ideal family" (Jones 11) brought about by women's increasing participation in professional and political life. The backlash ideology criticizes the efforts and achievements of feminism in improving women's status and options outside their traditional role and idealizes the family and the image of the woman as housewife and mother (cf. Jones 11). In contrast to this idealized image of femininity, the woman who places her professional ambition above her traditional female role is presented as being in danger of losing her femininity and thus prone to personal failure and unhappiness since professional life is regarded as unlikely to be compatible with the female personality (cf. Negra par. 5). A consequence of this seems to be what Negra calls a "neoconservative pressure to define women's lives in terms of marriage and domesticity" (par. 2) that can be seen as reflected in the chick flick and romance genres throughout the late 1990s and early 2000s in which "discourses of ideal femininity [are] clearly tilting away from the professional path" (par. 5). Instead of an ideal of emancipation and empowerment, there seems to be a tendency towards creating female characters who give up or scale down their professional ambition in favor of seeking fulfillment in their personal lives (cf. Negra par. 6).

In *The Devil Wears Prada*, the backlash idea can be found in the development of Andy's character, which seems to be moving further away from the ideal of femininity the more successful she becomes in her career. This development is shown through the characterization of Andy's two identities – the person she was before she came to New York and the person she becomes through the influence of the urban experience on her personality. Since the narrative starts after Andy has moved to New York from Ohio to pursue her dreams of becoming a famous journalist there, conclusions about her old identity can only be drawn from her behavior at the beginning of the film and from the references made by her friends. Initially, Andy is presented as a true 'good girl': good-natured and caring, smart but slightly naïve. Despite her high-reaching career aspirations she seems to have a reasonable sense of

the balance between ambition and personal life since her relationship and her social contacts obviously play an important role in her life. In contrast to this, as soon as she takes her first steps in the urban professional world, she seems to lose that balance and her priorities shift from personal life to work, which leads her to neglect her friends and her boyfriend as she becomes aware of her chances and invests more time and energy into her job. Consequently, she is criticized for being selfish and betraying her aims and values by the people who share her private life, while opinions about her in her professional world improve greatly. It seems that throughout this development, the characterization of Andy's personality changes from her being defined through her relationship, her social life and her good-natured femininity to a definition by her professional life and her career-oriented and questionable decisions. This seems to reflect the argument of the backlash ideology since Andy's successful participation in the professional world obviously distances her from the feminine ideal and inevitably leads to a conflict with her (previously ideal) femininity.

The relation between the 'good girl', the empowered woman and the ideal of femininity becomes most obvious in the contrast between the two female main characters, Andy and Miranda. While Miranda remains a static character throughout the film, the development of Andy's character first approaches the image represented by Miranda and finally diverges from it again. Miranda's character is an important factor influencing Andy's development. At the beginning of the film, she represents the successful career in the publishing business Andy is dreaming of and Andy obviously chooses this course by gradually adopting Miranda's attitude and approach towards professional life. However, Miranda, the empowered woman, is not in any way presented as an 'ideal' woman and, in fact, appears to have a strong negative influence on Andy's personality. This is pointed out, among others, by Nate during his argument with Andy leading up to their breakup, when the ringing of Andy's cell phone provokes his comment that the person whose calls Andy takes all the time is her real relationship. Since Miranda is the one calling Andy to give her tasks and orders, as she permanently does, this statement implies that Nate blames Miranda's influence for the changes in Andy's character. In this scene, as in a number of others, Andy eventually neglects her private life (by abruptly ending her conversation with Nate, or, in other scenes, with her friends or father) to follow Miranda's orders. In the breakup scene, as well as in the others, Miranda is the negative force luring Andy away from her private life and from everything that is (supposed to be) important to her. In doing so, Miranda lives up to her role perfectly – after all, she is the Devil, as the title of the film tells us. And, as the devil usually does, she tempts Andy with her offers – the career, the glamour, Paris – while Andy naïvely lets herself be led

astray. Comments made by Andy's friends, warning her that she has "sold her soul" (*The Devil Wears Prada*, ch. 23) and that she is "crossing over to the dark side"¹⁷ (*The Devil Wears Prada*, ch. 28) have little influence on bringing her back to the 'right' track. That the devil is not to be trusted is a lesson Andy must learn by herself, and so she does in Paris, when Miranda's façade collapses and the empowered-woman-the-devil turns into the empowered-woman-the-victim of her own empowerment.

The turning-point in Andy's development occurs when Miranda tells her about her impending (second) divorce. Andy finds Miranda in her hotel room in Paris, crying and deeply regretful about her personal tragedy. In this scene, the devil has lost all her glamour: without makeup and dressed in a plain grey bathrobe instead of the usual couture, Miranda is merely a shattered, lonely and (very obviously) aging woman. Through the way Miranda's situation is presented in her conversation with Andy it becomes clear that both the public¹⁸ and Miranda herself blame her ambition and her commitment to her career for the ruin of her marriage. Miranda thus becomes a more than perfect example of the fate predicted for the empowered female professional by the backlash ideology: she regrets her failure in being a wife and mother but seems to be unable to change her situation as she is unwilling to give up her professional ambition, which dooms her to loneliness and denies her a fulfilling personal life. Refusing to scale down her career in favor of her marriage, Miranda obviously has no chance to change her fate; she continues to invest all her energy into her job and, in the end, remains the "Devil" - the feared and criticized, career-obsessed professional that could hardly be further away from the feminine ideal of her culture. Andy takes Miranda's example as a warning and starts to reconsider her own life choices. Having been granted a look behind Miranda's façade – and, as it seems, into her own future – Andy rejects the life and the image of the empowered woman represented by Miranda and radically changes her approach to her career and her life.

Shortly after the conversation about Miranda's divorce, Andy quits her job at "Runway" and seeks a return to her old personality and to the relationships that used to define her private life. This development of Andy's character seems to move along the lines of the ideal of the female professional scaling down her career aspirations in order to remain true to her femininity that Negra sees as a recent trend in the chick flick genre (cf. par. 6). And indeed, Andy's change of course – her becoming the 'good girl' again – immediately shows its effects on her life. After Andy's final departure from Miranda and the "Runway" magazine, we see her and Nate in a reconciliation scene where she apologizes and expresses her regret about her behavior and its consequences. She has obviously come to the conclusion that her

strive for self-actualization is not worth its price: "I turned my back on my friends and my family and on everything I believed in... And for what?" (*The Devil Wears Prada*, ch. 32). Her insight implies that the empowerment she could have found in following her dreams of professional success is not worth the sacrifice it demanded. The fact that a reconciliation with Nate and a revival of their relationship is strongly suggested in this scene as a direct consequence of Andy's step away from her empowered course might be taken as a sign that Andy's character is restored to the image of femininity defined in terms of romance and relationship that is widely promoted as the current feminine ideal.

Through the development of Andy's character and in the contrast between her and Miranda, the film's perspective on the empowered woman seems to be revealed. Andy is obviously the film's heroine; her character and decisions are likely to be accepted since the audience is supposed to sympathize and identify with her. Miranda, as Andy's antagonist, is strongly villainized throughout the film, thus she is almost certainly met with disapproval and rejection. In associating Miranda with an empowered but threatening and undesirable type of femininity¹⁹ and presenting Andy as clearly less (if at all) empowered but remaining the 'good girl' – the harmless woman choosing personal values and relationship over career that eventually finds her happy ending – the film appears to go with the tendency of its genre to submit to the "neoconservative pressure" (Negra, par. 2) and promote the backlash ideal of femininity rather than the idea of empowerment. Having struggled, succeeded and suffered alongside with Andy, having gotten a taste of empowerment and encountered the "dark side" of it, the spectator is obviously supposed to conclude, in the end, that it is better for the 'good girl' to remain the 'good girl'.

However, Andy's final decision to quit her job at "Runway", in spite of being presented as the right way for her to choose, leaves behind a taste of compromise, created by the impression that she is not able to go for the ideal career chances if she wants to remain true to herself as a woman. Although the film suggests that Andy makes her choice with the firm conviction that it is what she wants, her decision, in fact, rather appears to be a consequence of her being disillusioned and scared off by her own future prospects that she has seen foreshadowed in Miranda's situation. Andy has learned that the empowered woman cannot be a 'good girl', but that only the 'good girl' fits the ideal and thus can truly succeed in life. How can she be said to have a "choice"?

4.2 The question of "choice"

The idea of choice is central to Andy's development throughout the film. In situations where she gets into a conflict between her commitment to her job and the expectations of the people around her, she keeps insisting that she does not have a choice when it comes to making decisions that lead her to neglect her partner, friends and family or to hurt other people's feelings in favor of her career. Andy is convinced that her actions, however untypical of her they may be and no matter how much she rejects them personally, are necessary if she wants to be successful in pursuing her career aspirations. Becoming aware of the involuntary changes in her character caused by this attitude, she obviously suffers from being torn between her old identity and the new one she gradually develops; however, it does not occur to her that she might be able to stop or reverse this process until the end of the film, when she eventually understands what her "choices" are. The final conversation between Andy and Miranda seems to provide an answer to the question of choice. Miranda tells Andy: "I never thought that I would say this Andrea, but I really... I see a great deal of myself in you. You can see beyond what people want and what they need and you can choose for yourself." (*The Devil Wears Prada*, ch. 31). Andy, astonished and obviously appalled by the idea of sharing character traits with Miranda, answers, "I don't think I'm like that" (*The Devil Wears Prada*, ch. 31), pointing out that she would not be able to make the cold-hearted and selfish decisions typical of Miranda. When Miranda makes Andy aware that her behavior has already begun to develop into that direction, Andy again defends herself claiming that she is not able to act differently because she does not have a choice. Miranda disagrees: "Oh, no, you chose. You chose to get ahead. You want this life, those choices are necessary" (*The Devil Wears Prada*, ch. 31). Miranda's statement seems to reflect the views of the backlash ideology by implying that the female professional needs to assume a kind of personality that stands in contrast to the nature of her female personality in order to prevail in the tough and merciless competition of the professional world. In this situation, Andy for the first time realizes that she does not have to follow the course represented by Miranda, which she involuntarily seems to have adopted. After some consideration, she asks: "But what if this isn't what I want? I mean, what if I don't wanna live the way you live?" (*The Devil Wears Prada*, ch. 31). Although, in Miranda's eyes, the possibility of any woman not wanting her life is "ridiculous", Andy answers the question for herself in that moment by quitting her job in the dramatic gesture of walking away from Miranda and throwing her ringing cell phone, which serves as a symbol representing Andy's career throughout the film, into a fountain.

The message of the decision Andy makes by turning her back on the life she believes to have been forced upon her is obvious: She rejects the idea of having a career for any price and the demands it makes from the high-achieving professional. This might be surprising with regard to the ambitious career aspirations she used to have which had motivated her to hold on to the job at "Runway" despite the initial difficulties since it promised her the best chances of becoming the successful journalist she wants to be. The fact that Andy chooses to give up this job and literally throws away the chances it would have given her appears to be a step backwards in her process of empowerment. Although *The Devil Wears Prada*, in general, seems to support the idea of women being empowered by the options for self-actualization and individual choice provided by urban life, the final turn in Andy's development appears to be moving away from this idea. The film seems to suggest that Andy's true empowerment lies in the fact that, through her experience, she finds the power to choose, which she obviously did not have earlier. In the end of her coming-of-age story she has learned that there are other options for her than to follow the ideal of excessive ambition and success represented by Miranda. She has found out what she wants and placed herself in life accordingly, which suggests a happy ending for her character. However, with regard to the chances she had and the limits and problems she encountered that did not seem to leave her another option but to give up those chances, Andy's decision at the end of the film remains a compromise that contradicts the idea of true choice. The mere fact that Andy has to choose appears to limit her possibilities. She obviously cannot 'have it all', which, from a feminist point of view, would be regarded as the ideal state of empowerment.

Nevertheless, with the final scene, the film emphasizes again that Andy has chosen the right way and that her choice is the key to a more promising future than the one Miranda's way of life would have led her into. Coming from a job interview at a small local newspaper, Andy walks past the office building where she used to work for "Runway" and sees Miranda on the other side of the street. She greets Miranda with a smile while Miranda prefers to ignore her. Miranda watches Andy walk away through the window of her town car. She is shot from outside the car with the reflection of the office building on the car window superimposed on her face, which creates the impression that she is imprisoned behind the walls of her office, or, more generally speaking, within the boundaries of the life she has chosen that limit her chances for fulfillment to her professional life represented by the building (see Figure 8). While watching Andy, her facial expression first seems to show regret and a certain thoughtfulness but, after a short moment, turns into a smile. This smile – the only genuine one we see on her face throughout the whole film – might imply that Miranda

acknowledges Andy's decision as the right or 'better' life choice. In contrast to the image of Miranda being imprisoned in her empowered position, Andy is shown walking off into the city without a distinct aim, which suggests that all roads in life are open to her. She seems to have retained her freedom since she is free from the self-imposed limits of the 'wrong' life choices and the problems caused by an overly empowered position.



Figure 8: Miranda, imprisoned in her empowerment (*The Devil Wears Prada*, ch. 35).

Conclusion

So, is *The Devil Wears Prada* a backlash film? Or does it have good intentions in promoting empowerment but ultimately falls victim to a currently popular ideology that opposes it?

If a backlash film, it is certainly not an obvious one. Empowerment is clearly the tone of the first part (roughly the first two thirds) of the story. Triggered by and profiting from the options of urban life, Andy's rise appears unstoppable and has more than a taste of a modern, urban fairy tale. The big city does not only pave the way for her career but also gets her 'the look' (a comparison with Cinderella appears almost inevitable when Andy the "glamazon" emerges from the "Runway" beauty department flaunting her new Chanel shoes), the attention, and along with it, the romantic hero²⁰ and the big chances. Criticism is slow and subtle in the beginning, as long as Andy remains the 'good girl' and uses the individual freedom and the potential for personal development provided by her urban surroundings only to transform herself into a more stylish, more glamorous and more attractive person. However, the more she begins to follow Miranda's example and moves away from a typically female behaviour while working her way into a more empowered position within the traditionally male-dominated urban world the criticism becomes unmistakable, and the "backlash" strikes fully in the final part of the film. Empowerment becomes the enemy –

destroying Miranda's life and throwing its threatening shadow on Andy's future – and the heroine eventually has to be disempowered by her choices, or the lack thereof, in order to be restored to the feminine ideal. This development might suggest that the film fails in promoting empowerment due to the impact of the current anti-feminist backlash ideology that seems to render an attempt to create an empowered *and* ideally feminine heroine impossible.

However, the initial atmosphere of empowerment might also serve merely as a subtle method to establish the backlash ideology. Instead of openly criticizing and opposing empowerment from the start, the film presents it as a desirable course to choose for the young woman, only to prove later that it is not. At the beginning of the film, we are led to believe that Andy wants to, and will, 'have it all'. During the opening credits (which establish the notion of empowerment through the imagery of women "taking on the city"), the 'good girl' and her mission are introduced by the theme song. In the refrain of the song, the line "suddenly I see / this is what I wanna be / suddenly I see / why the hell it means so much to me" (*The Devil Wears Prada*, ch. 1) is repeated over and over again as we see Andy and the other women on their way through the city, which emphasizes the impression that the women are doing exactly what they want. In contrast to this cheerful, encouraging line in the theme song, Andy's question towards the end of the film, "What if this isn't what I want?" (*The Devil Wears Prada*, ch. 31), appears by far less assertive and strongly disillusioned, implying that she has been misled by her own wishes, while her answer to the question suggests what the 'good girl' is supposed to want and strive for instead. If this is the film's strategy, the message would be that women can have everything in the city – if they want to. We are presented with women who, thanks to the freedom and the seemingly unlimited options offered by the urban lifestyle, can hold an equal and possibly even dominant role in personal relationships and make it all the way to the top in the professional world since restrictive gender roles and inequalities no longer exist. It seems that we are invited to believe that (at least in this particular urban world) emancipation is completed and that there is no need to push feminist issues any further. After all, success, power and independence can easily be achieved – all the young woman, Andy, has to do is move to the big city and take all the chances that are given to her there. However, we eventually are assured that this is not what the 'ideal' woman wants, or is supposed to want. Backlash intentions suggest themselves.

An overall backlash message is also implicit in the film's ending, which suggests that Andy's true empowerment lies in her decision to step down from her overly ambitious professional path. This seems to be in line with the theme of "downsizing" that Tasker points out as the 'real' empowerment promoted in backlash-influenced films of the late 1990s and

early 2000s "that stage the choice to arrive at the traditional as "empowered" and the "best" option" (108). The film does not go as far as to have Andy retreat from the public sphere into a traditional domestic scenario; however, the theme of downsizing can clearly be traced in the character's development. Although Andy stays in the city and keeps working on her career, she is not able to use the full potential of the chances that are given to her there. The kind of power that Andy is denied becomes obvious in the film's ending. In contrast to this, the power she retains, or retrieves, appears to be the non-threatening and typically feminine power that is celebrated in the theme song at the beginning of the film in a line repeated several times while we see Andy on her way to work: "Suddenly I see / she's got the power to feel, the power to give, the power to see" (*The Devil Wears Prada*, ch.1). Obviously, the kind of empowerment granted to the 'good girl', in the end, does not include the power to *take*, since she ultimately lacks the power to "take on the city" the way she had planned it.

The question in how far *The Devil Wears Prada* is, or can be read as, a backlash film certainly leaves room for a number of interpretations, depending, among other things, on the point of view from which "empowerment" is approached and defined. However, the film clearly does have a tendency to villainize empowerment (in the sense of giving the woman the power and possibilities that lead her beyond the harmless feminine ideal) and to present the 'good girl', limited and controllable in her power, as the 'ideal' woman. That this contrast is central to the film seems to be confirmed by the director's statement that an important aspect in the narrative is the "battle between Andy and Miranda" (*The Devil Wears Prada*, ch. 11, audio commentary). Due to the types of femininity the two characters represent, the battle between Andy the 'good girl' and Miranda the 'Devil' seems to become, at its basis, that of backlash vs. empowerment. The good girl struggles with the devil. She sympathizes with the devil and lets herself be led astray but eventually saves her soul. In the end, she obviously defeats the 'devil of empowerment'! Intended or not – backlash wins this battle.

Notes

¹ Friedberg mentions the development of the department stores, which granted women the "privilege of shopping alone" (quoted in Gleber 59), as an important factor that opened up the city for women.

² See, for example, Wilson, Gleber, Murphy.

³ Apart from the particular case of women's security, the issue of security and the film's almost utopian image of New York City as a completely safe urban space might also be interesting in the light of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Although the film is, as the director explains, intended to "capture the full experience" (*The Devil Wears Prada*, "Featurette: NYC and Fashion") of New York, the effects of the attacks that are still visible in the city at present and can also be felt in a generally strong concern with security and control seem to be erased from the characters' everyday lives. The absence of danger and of any reference to it might be read as an attempt to cure the trauma in the city's image and identity caused by the events and consequences of 9/11. This notion appears to be confirmed in a statement by the producer about the film's concept of the city: "It was really important that it was kind of a love-letter to New York." (*The Devil Wears Prada*, "Featurette: NYC and Fashion").

⁴ This tendency certainly has to do with the historical meaning carried by the image of a single woman walking the streets. Up to the early 20th century, middle-class women were not supposed to walk the streets unaccompanied or unchaperoned. Women roaming the city alone, especially without any obvious aim or purpose, were usually associated with prostitution or morally dubious activities in general (see Buck-Morss and Gleber for an extended discussion of this phenomenon).

⁵ For a detailed discussion of the flaneur and related figures and phenomena, with extended reference to Walter Benjamin's influential writing on the subject, see Buck-Morss.

⁶ See, for example, Gleber and Murphy for a discussion of the (non-)existence of a female flaneur.

⁷ Gleber draws this comparison of the meanings carried by women's movement on the runway of a fashion show and in the streets of a city in her analysis of women's images in public spaces in the film *Berlin: The Symphony of the City*, arguing for the fashion show as a situation of "public display and the evaluation of women's images" (69).

⁸ Although officially still Miranda's second assistant, Andy is given tasks that have previously been the privilege of the first assistant, such as the much sought-after and potentially career-boosting chance to accompany Miranda to the fashion week in Paris.

⁹ Director David Frankel might have drawn some inspiration from his experience of directing a number of episodes for *Sex and the City* when creating the image of the city in *The Devil Wears Prada*.

¹⁰ Bondi (164) presents an overview of the discourse.

¹¹ Although *The Devil Wears Prada* might not be a pure chick flick but rather seems to contain elements from different genres (such as comedy and drama), it can certainly be placed within the limits of a broader definition of chick flick since it is an adaptation of a chick lit novel.

¹² This 'range' of lifestyles, however, may be limited since it is largely restricted to a white, middle-class framework in the film.

¹³ Although it seems to increase the number of options offered by a modern urban lifestyle, the fact that this option is not equally granted to men and women in the film might be read as limiting the female characters'

choices since they can only choose within a heterosexual framework. The positioning of women as exclusively heterosexual seems to be part of a current ideal of femininity that narrows down the range of options for women with a strong focus on traditional female roles and thus stands in contrast to the idea of empowerment, as will be discussed later.

¹⁴ One of the most striking recent example of a narrative exploring the possibilities of women's sexual liberation and empowerment through the experience of urban life is certainly *Sex and the City*.

¹⁵ Andy, by chance, finds proof that Christian is involved in a Runway-internal intrigue aimed at driving Miranda out of her position as editor-in chief.

¹⁶ The term "postfeminism" is also sometimes used in relation to this phenomenon. However, the definitions and usages of "postfeminism" appear to be somewhat controversial and open to a variety of (partly contradictory) interpretations, thus the term is avoided here.

¹⁷ Christian's comment, "You, my friend, are crossing over to the dark side." (*The Devil Wears Prada*, ch. 28) is a reaction to Andy's attempts to defend Miranda against his criticism. Although meant humorously, it emphasizes the immediate danger of Andy losing her innocence by sympathizing too much with Miranda. In addition, Christian's reference to the "dark side" greatly boosts Miranda's villain status by associating her with certainly one of the most famous and evil supervillains in the history of film (who would not think of *Star Wars*' Darth Vader and the Dark Side of the Force here).

¹⁸ In this scene, Miranda predicts the media's reaction to her divorce, probably based on her experience with her last divorce: "Another divorce. Splashed across "Page Six". I can just imagine what they're gonna write about me: The Dragon Lady. Career-obsessed. Snow Queen drives away another Mr. Priestly." (*The Devil Wears Prada*, ch. 26).

¹⁹ Miranda is referred to as "The Dragon Lady" several times. This term, apart from being used for an Asian female stereotype in Western film, also carries the meaning "an overbearing or tyrannical woman" (*Merriam-Webster online Dictionary*), which seems to fit more than perfectly for Miranda's behavior. The image of the Dragon Lady emphasizes the threat Miranda is perceived as and her distance from the feminine ideal.

²⁰ In Christian, Andy, in fact, seems to have found her hero since it is pointed out that she has already been a great admirer of his journalist work before she met him. Moreover, he promises her the 'big chances' by offering to read her articles and introduce her to his editor.

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