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# Gossip, performance, and regulation: an examination of social communities in Tom Wolfe's I Am Charlotte Simmons

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Gossip, Performance, and Regulation: An Examination of Social Communities in Tom Wolfe's *I Am Charlotte Simmons*

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By

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In the *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)*, the first two definitions of *gossip* are rather benign: “One who has contracted spiritual affinity with another by acting as a sponsor at a baptism,” or “A familiar acquaintance, friend, or chum.” It is only by the third definition that gossip begins to take on more sinister qualities: “A person, mostly a woman, of light and trifling character, esp. one who delights in idle talk; a newsmonger, a tattler.” By the fourth, gossip has become nothing but a negative utterance: “The conversation of such a person; idle talk; trifling or groundless rumour; tittle-tattle.”

We have rather fixated wholeheartedly on its third and fourth connotations; common sense has long told us that the act of gossip is contemptible. Backing these commonsensical beliefs is a plethora of philosophical and religious views that have pervaded all forms of social thinking. As early as the Ancient Greeks, Aristotle believed that there was little reason to trust the heresy of someone you do not find reliable (124). To Aristotle, the best defense against gossip was one’s own sense of loyalty. Centuries later, gossip continued to be the subject of philosophical deliberation. For instance, Heidegger alleged that gossip was a form of intelligibility far afield from genuine understanding (213). From a theological stance, not only is gossip condemned by the Bible, but the philological roots of the word “Devil” themselves can be traced back to the act of gossip.<sup>1</sup> As Philosopher Henry Lanz notes: “Philologically the word ‘Devil,’ Old English *deofal*, is derived from *diabolos* (*dia*, ‘through,’ and *ballein*, ‘to cast’), meaning ‘one who casts words,’ ‘arguer,’ ‘accuser,’ ‘calumniator.’ Thus the Devil is originally associated with the ‘sins of the tongue’” (492). At times, gossip has even been the subject of

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<sup>1</sup> Leviticus 19:16 You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people, and you shall not stand up against the life of your neighbor: I am the LORD.

Proverbs 20:19 Whoever goes about slandering reveals secrets; therefore do not associate with a simple babbler.  
 Jeremiah 9:4 Let everyone beware of his neighbor, and put no trust in any brother, or every brother is a deceiver, and every neighbor goes about as a slanderer.

legislation. In 1547 Great Britain issued an edict that prohibited the gathering of women as a way to curtail gossip (Oakley 10). The edict was in response to the belief that gossip would erode domestic institutions. More importantly, the 1547 ruling highlights a perception that it is still strong today – gossip is a woman’s folly.

If these are the understandings of gossip that have structured our society philosophically, juridically, and practically, then it should come as no surprise that they are also recorded and reinforced by the pages of literature. For instance, Heidegger’s distrust of gossip as knowledge can be seen as echoing Shakespeare’s. In *Henry IV, Part 2*, Rumor opens the play by announcing: “Upon my tongue continual slanders ride, / The which in every language I pronounce, / Stuffing the ears of man with false reports” (1.1.6-8). What is more, gossip’s association with women precedes any written law of England. In *The House of Fame*, Chaucer depicts Fame as a goddess with numerous eyes, ears, and tongues who uses gossip at whim to determine our reputations. In Edith Wharton’s *The House of Mirth*, it is unbridled gossip that leads to Lily Bart’s downfall. No matter the epoch in literature, gossip and its “sins of the tongue” can be viewed in all of its disgraceful manifestations.

Tom Wolfe’s *I Am Charlotte Simmons* offers a look at how traditional understandings of gossip and its petty associations have continued into contemporary culture. Set in a fictional Ivy League University called Dupont, Wolfe’s novel follows four central characters: the eponymous Charlotte Simmons, a sheltered and prudish college freshman; Hoyte Thorpe, self-centered frat boy; Jojo Johanssen, college basketball star; and Adam Gellan, aspiring intellectual. The novel traces how each one of these characters traverses the unique challenges of his or her respective social domains. For Wolfe, many of these challenges expose the deterioration of academia at the highest level. That is to say, each character’s experience reveals how higher education has not

only has become a culture of social drunkenness in which students engage in rampant copulation, but also as being hijacked by first-class sports programs that greedily make a mockery of academia. However, as Wolfe attempts to expose the decline of American higher education, he also refortifies our commonsense views of gossip's pettiness.

These petty associations are most transparent in the story arch of Charlotte Simmons. Charlotte is a brilliant, but naïve college freshman from a small town in North Carolina. And unlike the other primary characters, she does not belong to any one social sphere. She drifts in and out of the other characters' domains in an attempt to forge a reputation that everyone will admire. This is because Charlotte is not like the rest of the students at Dupont, as she observes: "all about her moved her 6,200 fellow students, or a great many of them, in midflight, blithely ignorant of the fact that they were merely conscious little rocks. Whereas...I am Charlotte Simmons" (308). Here, Charlotte is asserting her intellectual superiority as a way to stand out from the general student body whose values are solely invested in the party culture of college life. Nevertheless, due to her lack of social experience, Charlotte is prone to becoming the subject of gossip. The more she tries to forge a reputation, the more embroiled she becomes in scandal. The novel climaxes when Charlotte's social standing is devastated after word regarding the loss of her virginity begins to circulate. Believing her life is ruined, Charlotte falls into a deep depression letting her academics fall with her reputation. In this fashion, Charlotte's downfall is similar to that of other literary heroines before her, such as Wharton's Lilly Bart, Hawthorne's Hester, and Foster's Eliza.

Despite Wolfe's ambition to expose the intellectual decay of the American university, *Charlotte Simmons* has been heavily ridiculed by critics who read his characters as nothing more than inflated stereotypes. In a *NY Times* book review, critic Michiko Kakutani states: "we are

shown the Darwinian, reality-show-like struggles for status among a group of students so stereotyped that they give new meaning to the word caricature” (nytimes.com). In a similar review, Julia Colyar writes: “While many laud the complicated narrative of the title character’s first year in college, others decry the plot, characters, and message as empty, juvenile and inauthentic” (74). However, unlike Kakutani, Colyar sees a silver lining. She maintains that these “caricatures” are in part what make the novel a success. She believes *Charlotte Simmons* is able to seduce the reader because its characters are ones that we are able to recognize, although at times we disdain them: “If we view *I Am Charlotte Simmons* with a questioning eye, we might wonder about those types and why they are so easy to identify. We might hope that Wolfe has got it wrong[...]but we are likely convinced of their reality before we even get past page two” (74). With these statements, Colyar tacitly reminds us that the characters of *Charlotte Simmons* are ones not far from what we perceive as real.

These generic traits also hint at a more subtle and yet complex aspect of gossip’s function within *Charlotte Simmons*. The formulaic structure of each character does not only represent his individual qualities, but also the mentality of the social spheres they strive to be a part of. Namely, the reader is able to see how each character intentionally conforms to stereotypes in order to stay a part of his respective social domains. To do this, however, they often have to socially present themselves in a manner that controls the kind of information spread about them. This is because gossip frequently occurs when one publicly presents themselves in a manner that is contrary to the social expectations of their community. In other words, the mere potential for gossip is enough to make the primary characters present themselves in ways that are conducive to their social group’s image. In doing so, they are able to maintain their standing within their social community. Thus, I posit that a close reading of *I Am Charlotte Simmons* demonstrates

how gossip transcends its petty associations by revealing a greater regulatory capacity, a capacity which is maintained through its power to influence social presentation. To clarify here, I do not mean to suggest that gossip has positive qualities, but rather that it has much more complex functions than mere pettiness.

To achieve this analysis, I draw upon recent research from a cadre of anthropologists, psychologists, sociologists that reveal how gossip operates far beyond its petty associations. Although the objectives of each field's research varies, all these studies nevertheless share a key point: critical elements of communities, elements such as inclusiveness, exclusiveness, and individual reputation, are all regulated through the use of gossip.

One of the pioneering figures in this research was anthropologist Max Gluckman. His 1963 essay "Gossip and Scandal" not only prompted his own field to scrutinize gossip and its relationship to communities, but also generated interest in the fields of psychology and sociology as well. To Gluckman, not only does gossip function as a form of social control by discouraging deviant behavior through public criticism, but our fascination with gossip about people within our social networks is a key feature in creating group boundaries and membership. He explains:

The important things about gossip and scandal are that generally these are enjoyed by people about others with whom they are in close social relationship. Hence when we try to understand why it is that people in all places and at all times have been so interested in gossip and scandal about each other, we have also to look at those whom they exclude from joining in the gossiping or scandalizing. That is, the right to gossip about certain people is a privilege which only extended to a person when he or she is accepted as a member of a group or set. It is a hallmark

of membership. Hence rights to gossip serve to mark off a particular group from other groups. (313)

Gluckman's comments here can likely be applied to ourselves. Rarely do we tell a stranger in confidence the juicy details of a friend's life. And when we do gossip in front of a stranger, it is usually to make him/her feel left out. In other words, when we gossip, we exclude those outside of our social network. In this way, gossip helps demarcate independent communities within a larger society. The maintaining of group boundaries indeed illustrates gossip's regulatory capacities. The building of social networks are rarely random, but rather are constructed through a vetting process based on a series of desirable traits, as Gluckman argues: "gossip and scandal will not contribute to the cohesion of a grouping of persons, unless these persons are united by a sense of community which is based on the fairly successful pursuit of common objectives" (314). Thus, in order to maintain the integrity of a community, people who are not conducive to the particular interests of a group are left to find one that fits their needs. Interests establish a criterion of shared values and goals that determine the moral and practical behavior needed for inclusion. Gluckman also contends that when a community is in trouble, it is gossip that fast-tracks the community's disintegration. Think of the breakup of a rock band, the fallout of a politician after a scandal, or workplace dysfunction. Each one of these examples likely involves gossip as a contributing factor in their decline. Gluckman then would have us consider that where gossip is the bond it is also the dissolvent.<sup>2</sup>

In the field of psychology, Nicholas Emler has also become a key figure in the study of gossip's role in society. Instead of examining how gossip serves the inclusiveness and

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<sup>2</sup> On this note, a study conducted by sociologists on fourth grade school girls revealed that gossip helps build solidarity: "In general, the closeness and quality of the girls' friendships were positively related to the amount of their peer-related gossip, the length of episodes, and the number of peers discussed" (McDonald, Putallaz, Grimes, Kupersmidt, Coie 400). Thus, their study gives further credence to Gluckman's own assessment.



exclusiveness of social groups, Emler explores how gossip is the exclusive factor in the construction and propagation of one's reputation:

Gossip does not merely disseminate reputational information but is the very process whereby reputations are decided. Reputations do not exist except in the conversations that people have about one another. Certainly my neighbor's reputation depends upon what he does – whether he beats his wife or makes beautiful furniture – but this is only the starting point of his reputation. Unless others both observe and discuss his actions, there is no reputation (135).

Emler maintains that the dissemination of reputation through gossip plays an integral part in social adaptation. The more developed our reputational knowledge is about others, the more securely we can navigate the social landscape of trust and distrust. This clearly has advantages for both the individual and larger community. On the individual level, being able to identify trustworthiness through reputational knowledge not only helps individuals identify the likelihood of a neighbor returning something he borrowed, but can also help identify someone who has garnered a more criminal standing. On a larger scale, our reputational knowledge plays a crucial role in the selection of community leaders. The more accurate we are in appraising a potential leader, the better off a community will be. The regulatory aspect of Emler's perspective is more or less self-explanatory. If gossip is indeed the largest factor in the dissemination of our reputations, then it would seem reasonable to suggest that we watch what we do, say, and how we appear lest someone will get the wrong idea. Emler seems to imply that gossip influences social presentation. In other words, we at times act contrary to our own self-conception in fear of gossip-related repercussions.

Social psychologist Robin Dunbar also focuses his attention more squarely on individuals prone to ill repute, whom he calls “free riders.” Dunbar defines “free riders” as any person that “takes the benefits of society without paying the costs” (100). This especially includes those that repeatedly and intentionally exploit others. Dunbar claims that without the use of gossip, free riders would quickly overrun society. The fact that gossip exposes “free riders” to public criticism is enough to “exert a significant effect on free riders’ willingness to break ranks on implicit or explicit social contracts” (108). A con man who sees another con man’s life and reputation destroyed by gossip might just abstain from criminal activity in fear of gossip and its stigmatizing power. As Dunbar further illustrates, gossip’s link to reputation not only helps individuals avoid exploitation, it even keeps would-be profiteers from taking advantage of others. Thus, Dunbar would have us give deeper consideration to how the mere threat of gossip prohibits deviant behavior before it can even manifest. Dunbar as well tacitly raises the notion of gossip and social presentation. The “free-rider” will act in accordance to the rules of society in order to prevent exposure of any devious behavior.

Along with social cohesion, exclusion, reputational dissemination, and regulation, gossip could even be said to have transactional properties. Psychologist Ralph Rosnow and sociologist Gary Fine consider how gossip is sometimes used as a currency to purchase valuable resources: “one can readily visualize rumormongering as a transaction in which passes a rumor for something in return – another rumor, clarifying information, status, power, control, money, or some other resource” (77). It should not be difficult to imagine gossip as an article of trade. Just think of contemporary American culture’s fascination with entertainment news. In this case, many are willing to hand over cash just to read about Hollywood’s breakups, pregnancies, and scandals. Or perhaps think of extortion, which usually entails the withholding of personal

information in exchange for some other resource. Gossip as a form of exchange indeed has regulatory aspects. As Rosnow and Fine have suggested, the purchasing power of gossip can buy one “power,” “control,” “status,” all of which contribute to how we as individuals or as part of a group operate in society. Let us keep in mind, then, how the exchange of gossip also plays a role in the greater social economy. Furthermore, we should also bear in mind how gossip’s transactional properties can be seen in relation to social presentation. It is not difficult to imagine how wielding “power” or “control” over others may result in someone socially presenting themselves in a way that assuages your commands.

Gossip’s ability to influence social presentation indeed gives it a performance quality. Namely, one may act contrary to their desires because it conflicts with the presentation their community is trying to uphold. Sociologist Erving Goffman is especially useful in explicating the link between gossip and performance. His book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* demonstrates how one’s social interactions constantly involve a series of performances in order to maintain certain social presentation of the self. What is more, Goffman maintains that these performances often are enacted to preserve a “team”, which he defines as: “a set of individuals whose intimate co-operation is required if a given projected definition of the situation is to be maintained” (104).<sup>3</sup> In a sense then, Goffman indicates how our social activity is not only linked to individual identity, but more directly to group identity. Think of a group of servers at an upscale restaurant who are all providing for their rich patrons. Each server must constantly be

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<sup>3</sup> Goffman’s concept of team does not involve social groups, or what he calls cliques. For Goffman, teams involve larger groupings of people performing for a wide-range of classes. At the same time, however, Goffman does state that a clique “may constitute a team, for it is likely that they will have to co-operate in tactfully concealing their exclusiveness from some non-members while advertising it snobbishly to others” (84). In *Charlotte Simmons*, we see characters from both cliques and teams preserving the “projected definition of the situation” through means of cooperation.

precise in his etiquette in order to maintain a respectful appearance, even if they dislike whom they are serving. Their presentation also must be seamless. This is because the slightest disruption could potentially bring the whole act crashing down. This notion of performance and teams also extends to various types of social orders. Whether someone is an academic or an athlete, there are particular forms of social behavior that distinguish these two social spheres. Yet, this social behavior is often a product of social theatre, acted out to uphold the overall reputation of their team. For example, Goffman states that sometimes a person will express himself in a certain way not because it necessarily reflects who he is, but because “the tradition of his group or social *status* requires this kind of expression” (6, emphasis mine). It is important to keep in mind that the preservation of group may not be the only thing motivating a team. Nevertheless, as we will see, acting in accordance to particular social presentations play a substantial role in the preservation of communities in *Charlotte Simmons*.

Although Goffman does not explicitly state that gossip is a contributing element to social performances, it is not difficult to imagine the link. As Gluckman pointed out, gossip cannot be conducive to the unity of a group unless its members are “united by a sense of community”. And according to Goffman, this “sense of community” is often maintained by adhering to a strict social performance. Any missteps in the performance may result in shame or humiliation as punishment for not complying with team standards, as Goffman stresses himself: “for at any moment in their performances an event may occur to catch them out and baldly contradict what they have openly avowed, bringing them immediate humiliation and sometimes permanent loss of reputation” (59). Emler as well fits within this framework with his argument that one’s *status* is indeed primarily disseminated through gossip, which often makes us act in ways that avoid humiliating situations. Once we factor in Goffman then, it seems fair to suggest that the

dissemination of one's reputation is at times actually the dissemination of one's social performance.<sup>4</sup>

I have organized my analysis of Wolfe's novel with respect to these popular and scholarly understandings of gossip into five key segments. The first segment will examine how a surface reading of *Charlotte Simmons* fortifies the common belief that gossip is above all a shameful act. What I mean by "surface reading" is how *Charlotte Simmons* would likely read if we were to view it only through our traditional understanding of gossip. Without a doubt, Charlotte is comparable to other literary heroines who have experienced social ruin at the hands of gossip. Because of this, one could view *Charlotte Simmons* as a cautionary tale that merely reconfirms the dangers of being the subject idle talk. What is more, Wolfe also plays on the long-lived stereotype that gossip is primarily a tendency of women. From this surface reading, I will move to a deeper analysis of the text that reveals gossip working beyond the notion of womanly pettiness and explores its broader applications in regards to performance, regulation, and social communities. The subsequent four segments are devoted to exploring how each character in *Charlotte Simmons* participates in group performances that are primarily enacted due to the potential that each might have for gossip. By organizing the analysis in this manner, I hope to develop a clearer picture of how gossip works in the novel to regulate each character and his or her social community through influencing social presentation.

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<sup>4</sup> As we can see from the studies briefly explicated above, gossip's utility goes far beyond mere maliciousness, but is also a necessary component for social cohesion, policing, generating reputation and status, and more. These particular studies are by no means exhaustive. In recent decades, the subject of gossip has incited numerous scholars from various fields to investigate its diverse social functions. Some of these studies have even made it the larger public through media outlets like the *New York Times*. For instance, a *New York Times* article by Alina Tugend explores some of the current research that highlights gossip's utility in reinforcing societal norms. In her article, Tugend gives a brief overview of studies from the social sciences that highlight gossip's greater social functions. These studies more or less validate Dunbar's findings that gossip serves as a way to warn against opportunists and regulate societal norms. One study she writes about was published in *The Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, and found that gossip plays a role in "protecting others from being exploited by passing on information about bad behavior to warn others."

Another important objective of this analysis is to bring gossip into the broader conversation of literary criticism in general. As a multifaceted social mechanism, gossip has various avenues to explore in regards to literature and yet has remained mostly absent from critical discussion. Of the few works of literary criticism to address the subject, Patricia Spack's seminal book *Gossip* has done well to illuminate specific aspects of gossip's literary value, especially from a feminist perspective. Spacks separates gossip into two distinct categories: "distilled malice" and "serious" gossip (4). To Spacks, "distilled malice" is gossip weaponized, the kind used to manipulate and defame rivals as a way to "gratify envy and rage" and to satisfy a "sense of power" (4). On the other hand, Spacks describes "serious" gossip as a "function of intimacy," which is used to express "crucial means of self-expression" and to effect "a crucial form of solidarity" (5). It is this latter form of gossip that Spacks explores in relation to female agency and bonding. Throughout her analysis, Spacks repeatedly illustrates how literary heroines often utilize gossip to subvert and challenge "public assumptions" (46). Spacks' analysis is remarkably insightful in demonstrating gossip's link to a greater literary perspective. Like my own analysis, however, Spacks can only explore so much of gossip's greater social function. Thus, the door is still wide open in terms of gossip and approaches to literary criticism.

### **I. Gossip, Women, and Charlotte Simmons as the Disgraced Heroines Before Her**

It is sometimes imperative to understand how something works on the surface before we start to understand how it works in depth. That is, it is not enough to illustrate how gossip works beyond its female stigma without first revealing how *Charlotte Simmons* elevates such associations. In other words, to read *Charlotte Simmons* is to read gossip operating in all of its

negative associations with women. Because of this, *Charlotte Simmons* echoes such predecessors as *The Scarlet Letter*, *The House of Mirth*, and *The Coquette*. By examining how *Charlotte Simmons* emulates these earlier works, we will not only see how Charlotte is a repeated victim of gossip, but also how the association of gossip with women has changed little over time. More importantly, we will begin to understand why a deeper analysis is needed in order to observe gossip operating beyond its female associations.

Emler declares in jest: “gossip is a quintessential female activity. Women chatter, tattle, gab, rabbit, prattle, nag, whine, and bitch” (118). As implied by his mock-disparaging remarks, society has often thought of gossip as a woman’s enterprise. Literature also represents women as most affected by gossip. For instance, it is gossip that reduces Hawthorne’s Hester to a life of loneliness whose name in death is replaced by a scarlet A. Likewise, the reputation of Foster’s Eliza is completely devastated by gossip, and the shame that follows from it could be said to be the culprit in her death. More significant yet is the work of the prolific Edith Wharton. Not only do protagonists like Lily Bart encapsulate gossip’s destructive force, but Wharton’s writings continue to have a significant impact on our perceptions of gossip. For example, the popular television series *Gossip Girl* was based on Wharton’s *Age of Innocence* and continues to showcase gossip’s devastating capacities in a largely female world. Thus, when we look at literature’s representations of gossip over time and glimpse at its influence on popular culture, it is no wonder that gossip has retained a chiefly female identity.

Like Hester, Eliza, and Lily, Charlotte struggles to navigate the shoals of her society and her public disgrace is largely the result of gossip. It is especially in this notion of society that *Charlotte Simmons* becomes a contemporary version of its predecessors. Whereas Hester, Eliza, and Lily are all socialites, Charlotte is a student at a prestigious university. The University

setting of *Charlotte Simmons* contains multiple social strata. This is because universities – even prestigious ones – have become an amalgamation of diverse classes and cultures. Thus, *Charlotte Simmons* illustrates gossip operating on a much wider scale than its precursors – a point to which we will return. And although Charlotte feels that her reputation has met certain death at the hands of gossip, hers is far from the more physical demise experienced by Hester, Eliza, and Lily.<sup>5</sup> More significantly, Charlotte represents a more complex paradigm in regards to sex and scandal. Despite these differences, one thing remains the same – unrestrained gossip is not only spread by women, but it primarily affects them as well.

Originating in a small town in North Carolina called Sparta, Charlotte Simmons, although brilliant, is socially unsophisticated. As Wolfe narrator explains, her cloistered upbringing and academic priorities have shielded her from a broader social experience: “In Sparta she had been able to avoid the sodden, drunken milieu of Channing Reeves and the Regina Coxes simply by going home in the evenings and studying and ignoring the upside-down contempt she felt from them and their crowd” (84). While offering protection, these studious priorities come at a social cost. When Charlotte is finally thrust into university life and forced to commingle with her peers, she proves unable to manage certain social situations. During her first night in the dormitory, she becomes so repulsed by her experience in the coed bathroom that she decides to hand-wash herself in the more private powder room. Nevertheless, even this proves to be a challenge, as we see when the narrator voices her fears: “Suppose people saw her going into the powder room with a toilet kit? What would they think – or assume?” (91). Charlotte’s concern here bears testament to her awkward social perceptions. That is, taking a “toilet kit” to a powder room hardly seems to merit social scrutiny. Yet, for somebody like Charlotte, somebody who has

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<sup>5</sup> Although it could be argued that Hester lived to be more or less an old woman, it is important to remember that, in death, she forever remained a victim of gossip.



never been part of a larger social experience, every social interaction becomes questionable. It is especially this social inelegance and heightened sensitivity that makes Charlotte prone to gossip. In fact, the role gossip plays in *Charlotte Simmons* is foreshadowed by the book she reads that very night: “At long last, Charlotte sat propped up against the pillow on her bed, reading a paperback of[...] *Ethan Frome* by Edith Wharton” (92).

This foreshadowing does not take long to come to fruition. When Hoyte makes sexual advances toward Charlotte at a frat party, she makes a public scene and storms back to her dormitory. Once there, she is met by a group of classmates sitting with their backs against the wall. As she endeavors to wade through their stares, they catch sight of her distraught appearance and berate her with questions. This only adds shame to Charlotte’s downtrodden condition; as the narrator declares of Charlotte’s thoughts in the third person: “these *witches*, assembled on the floor solely to torment her!” (240, original emphasis). Once in her room, Charlotte can still “hear the whole misshapen gauntlet clucking, whispering, sniggering, mock-sympathizing” (241). Charlotte later discovers that these “witches” are known as the “trolls”, as they are explained to her: “They sit there every weekend, and all they do is watch other people go out and come in and then gossip about them. Talk about losers” (250). The “trolls” can be viewed as a multifaceted representation of gossip’s negative associations. Descriptive words such as “clucking,” “whispering,” “sniggering,” are used here to describe the fluid murmurs of gossip. Although Charlotte can perceive these sounds, she cannot identify exactly what is being said. What she does know, however, is that each one of these sounds is the dissemination of conjectures regarding her emotional condition. As she tries to put the events of the night behind her, the “troll’s” speculative prattle only prolongs her “torment.” Furthermore, their designation as “trolls” is a pejorative term for those with nothing better to do but gossip. This latter point

especially affirms gossip's association with idle talk. Thus, the "trolls" also represent how "Gossip, like ennui, is born of idleness," or, put in the contemporary, how gossip is for people who need to get a life.<sup>6</sup>

In the *Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne depicts a group of women spending their time outside the prison noisily conjecturing on the infamy of Hester; the narrator remarks of this dynamic: "There was, moreover, a boldness and rotundity of speech among these matrons, as most of them seemed to be, that would startle us at the present day, whether in respect to its purport or its volume of tone" (35). One of these women even refers to herself and the group as "gossips" (35). The self-designation is apt. After all, their "rotundity of speech" is nothing more than the proliferation of mindless conjectures. In *The House of Mirth*, we see a similar occurrence that takes shape in the form of a realization. As Lily Bart's acquaintances incessantly scrutinize her with a "storm of enquires," it begins to dawn on her that these "winged furies" are nothing more than "prowling gossips who dropped in on each other for tea" (137). Although the designation "trolls" might imply more of a stigma than "gossips" and "winged furies," the reader nevertheless likely views each group in a similar light – as nothing but overly chatty females. While the "gossips" standing outside the prison as in *The Scarlet Letter*, the "trolls" in *Charlotte Simmons* are instead standing outside Charlotte's room, and there they effectively keep her prisoner. And as in *The House of Mirth*, Charlotte realizes these women, these "trolls," have no real sympathy to offer, they are instead nothing more than "prowling gossips." In addition, "gossips," "winged furies," and "trolls" are all words of demarcation used to portray not just groups of people, but groups of women. Thus, there is a reoccurring theme here. That is, women

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<sup>6</sup> The quote is from French writer Ninon de L'Enclos as found in Frank Wiltach's *A Dictionary of Similes*. See Works Cited for complete citation.

always take their tea with gossip. More importantly, we see how this association between gossip and women continues to persist in contemporary American culture.

Unfortunately for Charlotte, her encounter with the “trolls” is not the only gossip-related episode that ensues from her actions at the frat party. The next morning, she is confronted by her roommate Beverly who probes her about the boy she was with. Charlotte’s reaction to her inquiry is one of complete panic: “Charlotte’s heart palpitated for several seconds before snapping back into a normal – albeit speeding – rhythm. *It had already spread everywhere! Tenthirty in the morning, and everybody already knew!*” (244, original emphasis). As made clear by the emphasis, it is not only Beverly’s prying that induces Charlotte’s anxiety, but the thought that Beverly has ascertained this information through secondhand means. Although Charlotte learns that Beverly’s inquisition is the result of being seen firsthand at the party and not secondhand speculation, she is still unable to completely exclude the influence of idle talk from her roommate’s inquest. After all, Beverly does tell Charlotte: “I know more than you think I do” (244). Charlotte’s panic-stricken reaction is reflective of the stigmatizing power of gossip. She does not want Beverly or anyone else to think of her as promiscuous. Charlotte has good reason to be concerned: it is this very notion of a person’s sexual purity that gossip corrupts in *The Scarlett Letter*, *The House of Mirth*, and *The Coquette*.

As Spacks notes of this connection: “The metaphorical and literal ties between gossip and sex should not obscure the truth that gossip is, after all, not sex but *meta*-sex, a mode of control, a way of containing contradictory feelings” (136, original emphasis). Spacks’ comments here are especially applicable to *Charlotte Simmons* and its predecessors. In the *Scarlet Letter*, the mark of the scarlet A is not only there to remind the public of her misdeeds, but of sexual misdeeds. In *The House of Mirth*, it is not just any rumor that unhinges Lily Bart from the realm of social

acceptance, but that of adultery. In *The Coquette*, Eliza's reputation is shattered when she becomes pregnant with a married man's child. In each one of these examples we see gossip as a "mode of control" that punishes sexual misbehavior, regardless of whether such behavior is actual or presumed. Furthermore, each one of these instances illustrates the power gossip wields over reputation and why it is imperative to keep within the sexual standards of society. As Lucy Sumner writes in a letter to Eliza in *The Coquette*: "No female, whose mind is uncorrupted, can be indifferent to reputation. It is an inestimable jewel, the loss of which can never be repaired. While retained, it affords conscious peace to our own minds, and insures the esteem and respect of all around us" (133).

Charlotte's social downfall follows in this mode of reputational disgrace. After Hoyte Thorpe completes his sexual conquest by getting Charlotte to yield her virginity, he quickly abandons her and releases intimate details of their encounter. One such detail is the bloodstain she left on the bed marking the loss of her virginity. It is especially this little detail about which the "clucking," "whispering," and "sniggering" becomes the most pronounced. Charlotte even overhears her supposed friends conjecturing on this aspect of her shame: "Yeah, but you don't bleed on the bed! You just don't! And this girl Gloria – Gloria Barrone? – you know who I mean? She's a Psi Phi? She saw it" (549). As rumors of Charlotte's sexual encounter continue to propagate, so does her shame: "She was so wretched, so completely ruined, the only possible course left was to stop resisting in this doomed struggle with misery" (539). A major reason why Charlotte's loss of virginity is scandalous is because it exposes her as a fraud to the social group she was attempting to join. In *Charlotte Simmons*, Wolfe paints the sorority and fraternity world as a milieu of copulation and social drunkenness. That Charlotte was posing as one of them without have the required credentials (not being a virgin is one of them) signaled to the group

that Charlotte was someone who did not belong. Thus, gossiping about the blood stain on the bed was an effective way to oust her from their ranks. This is important detail that illustrates gossip's regulative capacity in regards to its influence over social presentation. It is also a detail that will be expounded upon in the next section during a deeper discussion of gossip, social presentation, and regulation.

Like her predecessors, Charlotte's life has become irrevocably altered and the "inestimable jewel" of her reputation forever tarnished. This causes Charlotte to fall into a deep depression. She becomes "ruined" by the fluidity of words that have marked her as unworthy. Although Charlotte is spared physical death for her sexual transgressions, she nevertheless experiences the death of her desired self-projection. That is, she can no longer just be the brilliant Charlotte Simmons, or as her roommate Beverly puts it: "I mean where did little Miss Library Stacks go?" (541). It is because her name now carries other connotations, connotations that carry the weight of sexual shame. However, the dynamics of this sexually transgressive shame are much more complicated than in the literary predecessors. For Hester, Eliza, and Lily rumors concerning sex out of wedlock and affairs with married men is the main culprit in their reputational demise. For them, safeguarding the notion of chastity is the only way to avoid such rumors. Charlotte, however, belongs to different time and culture. Being a virgin in the social circle she desires to belong to presents a difficult situation. She is faced with being labeled a tease if she interacts with men without offering sex. On the other hand, if she does engage in intercourse she then faces being exposed as an imposter. For Charlotte, then, sex and reputation is much more complicated to negotiate than it was for her predecessors.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> An obvious question here is what are the shifts in culture that have led to Charlotte's predicament concerning sex since the age of Hester, Lily, and Eliza? A sufficient answer to this question would be beyond the scope of this analysis. However, to those that are interested, Foucault's *The History of Sexuality* may be a useful starting point. In

The similarities between *Charlotte Simmons* and its predecessors cannot be ignored. Each one of these texts showcases a young woman who ends up wrecked on the gossipy shoals of society. Charlotte is a woman who time and again witnesses other women “clucking” and “whispering” and “sniggering.” These are the accumulation of passing sounds that harden and crystalize and sink not only the reputation of Charlotte, but that of Hester’s, Lily’s, and Eliza’s as well. At the same time, however, there are also major differences between Charlotte and her predecessors. Charlotte showcases the shifts in contemporary American attitudes toward sex. For her, it is not as simple as abstaining from sex, but rather how to navigate the shoals of her social sphere in a way that does not expose her as an imposter.

## II. Gossip, Regulation, and Performance

Although on its surface, *Charlotte Simmons* seems to reaffirm our everyday sentiments about gossip, its collegiate setting and multiple narratives enable us to see how gossip works beyond singular, gender-specific qualities. That is, the novel represents the power of gossip as a phenomenon affecting *every* group within *every* social stratum, and *Charlotte Simmons* presents an opportunity to see these inner-workings, but only if we are willing to look a little deeper. Each primary character in *Charlotte Simmons* navigates the regulatory aspects of gossip in both similar and dissimilar ways. That is, some of the characters impeccably illustrate how gossip acts as a hallmark of social acceptance, whereas other characters exemplify how gossip works as a type of transaction. Nevertheless, the one thing each of these characters highlights is how gossip

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the *History of Sexuality* Foucault argues that discourse on sexuality exponentially proliferated during 17<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> century. Thus, by the late twentieth century sex had become a common topic in many social circles.

regulates and influences their social presentation, especially for the purpose of maintaining standing in their social communities.

Even though a large part of this section will be dedicated to how gossip operates within the social spheres of the male characters of *Charlotte Simmons*, it is important to begin with a further analysis of Charlotte herself. As we saw in the previous section, Charlotte's social life is destroyed by gossip. This makes Wolfe's work something of a contemporary version of past female-centered cautionary tales. However, as I indicated in my introduction, Charlotte is eventually able to rise like a phoenix from the ashes and secure her place among the people she so desperately wants to impress. And she achieves this ascent through the very thing that destroyed her in the first place – gossip. In this investigation, then, I want to start exploring how Charlotte transforms herself from country bumpkin to an endorsed member of what I will refer to from here on as the “cool team.”<sup>8</sup> This analysis will not only illustrate a performance aspect to Charlotte's character, but also reveal how it is often gossip that is sitting in the director's chair, giving out social prompts which ultimately regulate her behavior. Furthermore, since Charlotte is not immediately part of any social group, she is the most viable character for revealing how one can achieve social inclusion through gossip, even if there are some of those proverbial bumps along the road.

In addition to this analysis, I will investigate moments in which Charlotte's path to the “cool” team adheres to Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital. Bourdieu believes there are two forms of social hierarchy that work side by side. On one side of the hierarchy there is economic capital, which includes things like money, property, and other forms of material wealth. On the

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<sup>8</sup> What I primarily mean by “cool team” are people who are deemed socially acceptable, or people worthy of social envy. Furthermore, the notion of team here is in reference to Goffman. That is, the “cool team” is “a set of individuals whose intimate co-operation is required if a given projected definition of the situation is to be maintained” (79).

other side there is cultural capital, which is defined as non-financial social assets ranging from education and style of speech to physical appearance. This form of capital plays a substantial role in regards to one's inclusion in a social sphere, as Bourdieu notes: "Social subjects, classified by their classifications, distinguish themselves by the distinctions they make, between the beautiful and the ugly, the distinguished and the vulgar, in which their position in the objective classifications is expressed or betrayed" (6). As we will see, Charlotte's shift toward the "cool" team can be viewed as an effort to acquire the taste of what counts as cultural capital. That is, by trying to acquire the taste of the "cool" team's social presentation, she is trying improve her standing in the social hierarchy by making herself distinct from other, less appealing social groups. And again, as we will see, she primarily achieves this through her manipulation of gossip.

As for the three male characters of the text, we will see many parallels between them and Charlotte in regards to gossip and social presentation. That is, we see how gossip influences their social presentation in order to maintain standing within their social communities. In addition, we will also see how their social presentation operates in a more male specific capacity, mainly how masculinity operates within gossip and social presentation. For instance, throughout the text, Jojo regularly eschews presenting himself as someone with a curiosity for higher education. Because he is afraid of the power gossip plays in the preservation of one's image, especially when it comes to his status in the eyes of his black teammates. For Jojo, being just as physically built and athletic is not enough to fully belong to the social sphere of his black teammates. However, in order to maintain what status he has with his black teammates, he must abide by a specific code of conduct, which primarily places physicality over intellect. Yet, this eventually becomes a



difficult task for Jojo to manage and there are gossip-related consequences for any mismanagement.

Similarly, Hoyt is concerned with maintaining a masculine image, but instead of being afraid of gossip's ubiquitous presence, he embraces it. Namely, Hoyt takes advantage of certain social situations in order to turn himself into what he believes to be the perfect image of manliness. What is more, Hoyt believes that this projection is for the overall good of the fraternity and its image. Thus, like Jojo, we see Hoyt as part of a "team," which as well requires a particular kind of performance. Another aspect of gossip that Hoyt's character illustrates is its use as a social transaction. Through a bribe, Hoyt demonstrates how gossip has a particular value in regards to what Fine and Snow say about "power," "control," and "status".

Lastly, Adam represents the social perils of lacking a masculine presence. In other words, because of his status as the proverbial "dork", he is routinely excluded from participating in the social spheres of the primary characters. Even though Adam is time and again the subject of exclusion, he nevertheless is able to utilize gossip to reveal Hoyt as a "free rider." "Free rider," we remember, is the term Dunbar uses to describe people who cheat the system. Dunbar maintains that gossip effectively reduces the number of "free riders" by ratting them out to the greater social community. In this way, Adam not only shows us how gossip operates as a form of exclusion, but also demonstrates how gossip can be used to subvert those of higher social standings.

#### - **Charlotte Simmons**

When Charlotte arrives at Dupont, she slowly realizes – although perhaps on a subconscious level – that she cannot have her cake and eat it too in regards to social reputation. That is, she must choose between being "little Miss Library Stacks" or being perceived as

socially acceptable. As has already been explained, Charlotte chooses the latter, which leads her to being publicly disgraced, followed later by her redemption. As Charlotte navigates these social networks in an attempt to discover what it is that she wants, the reader sees just how concerned she becomes with the potential for gossip in nearly every social situation. And since Charlotte does not completely belong to any one social sphere, she is the best character for examining the role gossip plays in the forging of reputation and how social actions (contributing to reputation) are directed by gossip.

Charlotte is extremely conscious of how her social actions will be interpreted by those who see them. To recall an earlier example, she was even concerned about what people might say about her toilet kit as she walked to the bathroom. Although being anxious about being seen with something as trivial as a toilet kit may seem outlandish, her concern may not entirely lack merit. For instance, when Beverly brings her friend Erica to her room to discuss boys and what to wear, Charlotte is ultimately ignored and is excluded from the conversation. The narrator explains how Erica “gave Charlotte a wide, flat, dead smile, then ran her eyes over Charlotte’s plaid bathrobe, pajamas, and slippers...slippers, pajamas, and bathrobe. That done, she turned her attention to Beverly and never looked at Charlotte again” (141). As made explicit in this passage, Charlotte’s appearance automatically indicates to Erica that Charlotte does not belong to her social sphere. As Charlotte sits there disregarded, Beverly and Erica discuss the gossipy essentials of their social life, with Beverly asking Erica: “did I tell you he wanted to hook up in this little sports car he has?” (141). That Beverly and Erica gossip in front of Charlotte without including her recalls a key component of Gluckman’s analysis. As stated in the introduction, Gluckman maintains that there “is no easier way of putting a stranger in his place than by beginning to gossip: this shows him conclusively that he does not belong” (314). This exclusion

through gossip, indeed, is what has happened to Charlotte. Erica can tell by Charlotte's appearance that she not only is a stranger to their world, but also needs to be reminded of this fact by gossiping in front of her without any chance of inclusion. Furthermore, that Charlotte's appearance marks her as socially unacceptable by demonstrates that she does not share their taste and therefore does not have the required cultural capital.

Their attempt to make Charlotte feel unwanted works impeccably; the narrator explains her thoughts: "The very fact that she existed in this room had become an unfathomable embarrassment. How could she remain standing here by the window, watching and listening to two girls who ignored her" (142). The reader sees here how gossip is used to regulate group interaction between members. What is more, it is Charlotte's appearance that mostly leads to such exclusion, which demonstrates an imperative link between outward show and social acceptance. This link is not only noticed by the reader, but by Charlotte herself. Thus, this type of frank social exclusion also works to teach her the importance of social presentation. Toilet kit or pajamas, Charlotte is beginning to learn that if she wants to make herself socially acceptable she will have to change her social presentation.

The reader sees Charlotte's move toward social transformation soon after Beverly and Erica go out for the night, leaving her alone in the room with the narration: "Charlotte went over to Beverly's vanity mirror and studied her face under its hot little lights. Then she went to Beverly's closet and opened the door and studied herself in Beverly's full-length mirror. She wasn't merely smarter than Beverly, she was prettier" (145). In this passage, we see Charlotte gazing at her reflection looking not only for validation, but for change. This is evinced by how Charlotte is not just looking in any old mirror, but the mirror of her shallow, but fashionable roommate. She is putting herself in Beverly's place imagining how her external presence is

superior. Furthermore, in this instance, we see Charlotte beginning to prioritize aesthetics over intellect. This is an important distinction because it indicates that Charlotte is considering trying out for a new “team” – a team that places sex and fashion before academics. Charlotte’s desire to be placed in the outwardly attractive category manifests itself shortly afterwards, when Charlotte is kicked out of her room in the middle of the night so Beverly can copulate. With nowhere to go, Charlotte retreats to the common area in which she finds another girl that has been ousted from her room for the same purpose. Nevertheless, this company does not bring Charlotte any sense of relief. Instead, she is distressed to discover that this girl is aesthetically compromised. This observation elicits a sense of panic in Charlotte: “Part of Charlotte wanted to get out of the place immediately, even if it meant walking around aimlessly until dawn. She refused to be lumped with this...well...homely girl” (156). What we see here, then, is Charlotte beginning to actualize the image of herself reflected in Beverly’s mirror. However, it is more than just about aesthetics, but about social positioning. Charlotte is fearful that if she does not change her social presentation, she will be permanently lumped in with the “homely” girls.

In *Charlotte Simmons* the notion of attractiveness cannot stand alone. That is, to be considered desirable in Wolfe’s vision of collegiate life – a vision that places shallow appearances over academic astuteness – one must first participate in particular forms of activity, which, as Goffman states, constitute a team: “In general, those who participate in the activity that occurs in a social establishment become members of a team when they co-operate together to present their activity in a particular light” (102). As Charlotte begins to slowly participate in the social culture of desirability, she begins to witness immediate results. These results are demonstrated in the conversation Charlotte has with Beverly after the frat party. Although this particular conversation highlights Charlotte’s anxiety in regards to gossip, as we have seen, it

also helps Charlotte come to a significant realization: “It occurred to Charlotte that this was only the second time since the day they met that Beverly had addressed her by name” (245). Charlotte discovers that by being seen with a guy at a frat party, she has increased her social standing with Beverly, an accomplishment achieved by participating in a social activity that relates not only to Beverly, but to everyone like Beverly: peers who are more concerned about physical appearances, drunken revelries, and noncommittal copulation than being reserved, clever, and academically ambitious. Charlotte is also beginning to accrue cultural capital. Her physical presence at the frat party coupled with the notion that she was seen with a guy has given Charlotte some value to the likes of Beverly.

In order to add to the success of these results, Charlotte must attempt to direct how people perceive her in any given public situation. That is, she must regulate her public actions. Because of this, she must become increasingly aware of the prospect for gossip. This is especially seen in her public interactions with Adam, who has no social appeal beyond his small clique. Thus, being seen with Adam poses risks to the type of social appearance Charlotte is attempting to cultivate. Initially, Adam and Charlotte develop a friendship based off a mutual intellectual attraction. However, where Adam wants a sensual relationship with Charlotte, she instead wants to keep things platonic. What is more, Charlotte wants to limit their exposure to the greater public. An example of this occurs when she and Adam are taking an afternoon saunter. During this excursion, Adam attempts to make mild advances on Charlotte through forms of affection such as holding hands and cuddling. Yet, Charlotte is unwilling to placate Adam for a very specific reason: “What if someone saw her cuddling with a...dork?” (395). With this fear, Charlotte is revealing her priorities in regards to her image. She believes that being seen with Adam will inhibit the image of desirability that she is now trying to cultivate. She worries

that Adam will detract from her small but growing share of cultural capital. Once again, we bear in mind Bourdieu: “Social subjects, classified by their classifications, distinguish themselves by the distinctions they make” (6).

Most importantly, it is more than just being seen that regulates her actions toward Adam, it is rather the consequences of being seen – the gossip that will ensue. Charlotte is well aware of the connection between being seen and gossip. Recall Charlotte’s anxiety after being questioned by Beverly about the frat party: “*It had already spread everywhere! Ten-thirty in the morning, and everybody already knew!*” (244, original emphasis). What Charlotte is well aware of then is the same thing Emler points out in his own assessment: “Reputations do not exist except in the conversations that people have about one another” (135). Being aware of this, Charlotte is making sure to take precautions in order to direct the “conversations that people have” about her. Hence, even though gossip is not even explicitly mentioned in Charlotte’s apprehension regarding being seen with Adam, it nevertheless is still operating, still lingering in the back of her head and directing her course of action in a way that protects her newly acquired taste for aesthetics over intellect as the quicker and surer route to cultural capital.

After Charlotte gets invited to the Saint Ray frat formal, she believes that she has finally become part of the “cool” team’s act. However, she is sadly mistaken. On the way to the frat formal, Charlotte is stuffed into a car with sorority girls. And when she tries to engage in a conversation with them she has a rude awakening. This rude awakening results, in part, from Charlotte laughing at all the wrong things, which reveals to the sorority girls “how frantically, how fawningly, she wanted to be one of the gang” (471). It eventually dawns on Charlotte that she has been over-acting the part, exposing herself as a fraud. Instead of trying to rejoin their conversation, she instead becomes resentful: “So many idiotic stories...so much idiotic gossip”

(471). This resentment primarily stems from her failure to successfully join in on their conversation, their gossip. Again, she has been effectively excluded from being part of the group just as she was with Beverly and her friend. As these sorority girls gossip away, Charlotte becomes nothing more but a blip in their periphery.

Even though Charlotte initially detests these “two bitches”, their rejection of her only makes Charlotte strive harder to prove to them that she belongs in their sphere (471). In fact, it is this attempt at social acceptance that leads to her downfall. Once at the frat formal, Charlotte is of course pressured into imbibing. At first, she resists, but then notices how one of the sorority girls is already on her second drink. This observation changes her course of action: “It became terribly important that Nicole not seem cooler than she was, more fun, more grown up, on a different planet when it came to sophistication” (482). Charlotte soon gives in against her better judgment and begins drinking. As the passage conveys, this decision is induced by her desire to act, perform a part in order to seem “cool,” in order to become accepted. As the night progresses, so does the impending climax of the text. Charlotte finds herself alone in the hotel room with Hoyt, naked on the bed. She has great reservations toward what is about to transpire. But what influences her to go through with this monumental decision is none other than gossip:

Did she dare become known as the teasing bitch who lets a guy get worked up[...]and lies there naked as a jaybird, legs parted, and then waves a finger and says no-no-no-oh? Ohmygod what would that look like – would that bury Charlotte Simmons for good? Dead in the ground at Dupont with loser and prude and tease on her headstone? (520)

Again, the word *gossip* and its various synonyms are not explicitly used here, yet its presence is nevertheless overwhelming in this passage. Charlotte knows that this intimate encounter between

them will not stay that way, as indicated by her fear of becoming the “teasing bitch”.

Additionally, there seems to be a reference here to the *Scarlet Letter*: instead of Charlotte’s tombstone being marked by a symbolic *A* indicating sexual misdeeds, Charlotte is more concerned that it will read as the exact opposite – the “teasing bitch” unwilling to partake in sexual activity. Therefore, to construct the reputation she wants for herself, she must play the role of someone who belongs to the sphere of social acceptability and, as a result, she gives herself to Hoyt. To reiterate Goffman: “In general, those who participate in the activity that occurs in a social establishment become members of a team when they co-operate together to present their activity in a particular light” (102). In a sense, this is what Charlotte is attempting to accomplish. In the world of Dupont’s in-crowd, sex is not only portrayed as an acceptable activity to engage in, but is looked upon as customary. This is reflected by Charlotte’s reservations regarding the gossip-related consequences for not following through on this expectation. However, Charlotte failed to realize that losing her virginity in this manner would further expose her as a fraud. Thus, the dissemination of the loss of her virginity is a way of effectively ousting Charlotte from the “cool” team. In addition, it is not just that gossip is implied here, but the fact that it plays a substantial role in how Charlotte behaves toward the situation. That is, she once again goes against her better judgment because the potential for gossip is threatening how people will perceive her. In this manner, gossip can once more be seen directing her actions in a way that conforms to team expectations. As we see, gossip does not need to take place verbally in order to regulate one’s behavior. At least here, the awareness of its potential is enough to regulate social conduct. Especially in the case of sex, then, gossip is used as a powerful regulator. Depending on how one is able to direct the dissemination of their sexual



conduct will greatly affect their social standing, especially in regards to a social circle like the “cool” team.

Even as Charlotte is aware of the damaging consequences of being branded a tease, she underestimates how the loss of a woman’s virginity at a drunken frat formal might generate a sense of scandal. And, as already noted, this leads to Charlotte’s self-loathing. However, even when Charlotte regains her social poise, she still cannot avoid making an impression on the very society that destroyed her. When Dupont’s famous basketball star, Jojo Johanssen, offers to buy Charlotte lunch at the cafeteria, she reluctantly accepts due to the prospect of being seen with him: “Her reputation was so ruined, she was now reduced to hooking up with random dorks like Adam. But if she reappeared with the cool-by-definition Jojo Johanssen” (680). This leads Charlotte to strategically select a table in the middle of the dining room to sit at. Her tactics prove effective when two girls from the frat formal happen to sit nearby and see Charlotte basking in the “coolness” that is Jojo Johanssen: “Charlotte, fixing her gaze upon Jojo, *manufactured* the merriest of laughs and withdrew her hand from his. And the two witches – they couldn’t have helped but get an eyeful of it” (682, emphasis mine). This passage is quite self-explanatory. Charlotte is staging a performance to let these “two witches” know that she is still part of the “cool” team. In this manner, Charlotte uses the power of gossip as a form of strategy to reenter the ranks of the “cool” team. Namely, if she can get people to see her with the “cool-by-definition Jojo Johanssen”, she might be able to regain some of her cultural capital.

Adding to such attempts at self-rehabilitation, Adam has assiduously nursed Charlotte’s ego back to health. Even so, she is still clearly self-conscious about being seen in his presence. This illustrates just how defined by the act Charlotte has become. The image of herself in Beverly’s mirror is now the mainstay and “little miss library stacks” has now been permanently

replaced by a purely exterior social presentation . On this note, Goffman states: “At one extreme, one finds that the performer can be fully taken in by his own act; he can be sincerely convinced that the impression of reality which he stages is the real reality” (17). That Charlotte can so easily write Adam off as a “dork” even after his enduring care for her demonstrates that Charlotte’s self-recognition through the declaration “I Am Charlotte Simmons” no longer denotes a sense of intellectual superiority. Her shame regarding Adam is actually a greater shame of the Millennial Mutants. In the text, the Millennial Mutants are what Adam and his friends refer to themselves as. As Adam explains it, the name itself is supposed to represent people operating on a “higher” intellectual “level” (277). Identifying themselves as mutants is quite ironic. The “cool” team indeed sees them as a social aberration. This is precisely why Charlotte does not want to be seen with Adam. Charlotte fears that if people catch her with Adam they will lump her in with the “mutants.” And at this point, Charlotte is attempting to regain cultural capital within the “cool” team and Adam’s “mutant” identity jeopardizes this.

Charlotte’s transformation into a member of the “cool” team seems to be complete by the end of the text when she ends up dating Jojo. This is a peculiar occurrence, since, throughout the text, Charlotte shows little interest in Jojo other than using him as a way to secure cultural capital. However, this might be the exact motive behind the relationship:

Of all the female freshman at Dupont, how many were truly better known than Charlotte Simmons? In a way, the notoriety of her getting her dust knocked off at a Saint Ray formal – which everyone but her had seemed to know was a euphemism for bacchanal – had only made her rise, from social death to the eminence she now enjoyed as girlfriend of the superstar Jojo Johanssen, yet more dramatic, yet more a feat. (734)

Charlotte's rise from "social death" as the girlfriend of Jojo finally brings her into the sphere of the "cool team." As word spreads of their relationship, she is treated as a member. For example, she is invited to a get together by one of the sorority girls that had paid no attention to her at the frat formal: "The next day, Nicole came up to her at Mr. Rayon and said Charlotte really should come by the Douche house during the impending spring rush" (734). This invitation is much more than an invitation to a sorority gathering, it is the invitation to the team of which Charlotte has been striving to be a part. She has finally realized that image of "coolness" that beckoned her in Beverly's mirror.

Yet as I have made repeatedly clear throughout this analysis, in order to maintain this image of "coolness," Charlotte must manufacture and maintain a particular social presentation in order to keep a positive image in the face of gossip. This is seen in the last page of the text when Charlotte is attending one of Jojo's games. As Jojo scores, the entire stand cheers, but not Charlotte, instead she is reflecting on the journey that brought her to this place and time. However, once she realizes that she is not acting as she should be, she quickly changes her appearance:

She sure hoped not too many had gotten a real eyeful of the glum, distracted, thoroughly uninterested look on her face. She clicked on the appropriate face *just like that*[...]she worked on keeping the joyous smile spread across her face and clapping with some semblance of enthusiasm. (738, original emphasis)

As we see here, Charlotte must adhere to the act to save face, literally: she must "work" at keeping a "smile" and clap with pretend "enthusiasm". Furthermore, the notion that Charlotte can click "on the appropriate face *just like that*" indicates that she has completed her transformation as a member of the "cool" team. Charlotte now knows what is expected of her

and can successfully navigate gossip and its various webs. She not only knows now how to present herself in a way that garners the word of favor rather than disfavor, but she understands the power dynamics of the “cool” team. Understanding their dynamics has given Charlotte the power to maintain standing within their ranks. At the same time, she is still subject to it; she knows all too well that status within the “cool” team is anything but permanent and requires a constant performance. Nevertheless, by the end of the text, Charlotte has established her worth to the “cool team”. She has amassed enough cultural capital to be considered part of their ranks. She has shown to everyone that she has the proper social presentation, the right language, and the “cool” guy, which all give her a particular form of social value.

I believe Wolfe would want the reader to perceive this as a bittersweet ending. Although she is wasting her beautiful mind, she nevertheless has found the social acceptance for which she strived so hard. At the same time, Wolfe wants the reader to think about this more ominously. The institution of higher learning has become so ingrained in a culture of shallowness that even its best and brightest must at least attempt to become part of the “cool” team or suffer the perilous consequences. This second reading is especially noticed in how Charlotte must “click on the appropriate face” in order to hide the “uninterested look on her face.” This indicates that the social order is repressing her true sentiments, but there are consequences for allowing those true sentiments to become too visible. If we abide by the second reading, Wolfe is then offering a political critique of American higher education, one that maintains that the collegiate system promotes mass conformity that preaches shallowness rather than the development of unique intellectual talents. If this is our takeaway, then Wolfe is getting at something much deeper in regards to higher education in America. It is not just that the collegiate system has become degraded, but that it claims to promote pedagogy, training, and self-development and instead is a

front for the mass production of shallow individuals. The power of this shallowness operates by placing an emphasis on particular kinds of “cool” physicality – which most importantly includes good looks and sex – over developing an intellect. More importantly, it uses the prospect of gossip to influence social presentation to perform in a way that adheres to a culture of aesthetics, booze, and sex. As this analysis has shown, this is made apparent in the outcome of the novel. Instead of Charlotte’s intellectual gifts flourishing at one of America’s top universities, she instead becomes part of this culture of shallowness.

As we will see, this collegiate production of shallowness continues into the story lines of Jojo and Hoyte. For Jojo, the university’s culture of sports restricts his academic ambitions and regulates his conduct through gossip. As a member of the Dupont’s fraternity system, Hoyte avoids academics and embraces a social presentation of manliness, which he promotes through gossip. Nevertheless, such readings seem to reaffirm that gossip is nothing but negative. Even so, these analyses will still highlight a much more complex function than mere pettiness, a function that showcases gossip’s regulative capacities in regards to social presentation. What is more, Adam’s analysis will in fact demonstrate how gossip is able to subvert this shallowness through no other than gossip, which reveals gossip working beyond negativity.

#### - **JoJo Johansen**

In *Charlotte Simmons*, Jojo is perhaps the only character that seems to have a satisfying ending. By the conclusion of the text, he is dating Charlotte and is playing the best basketball of his career. Nevertheless, to get to this point, he must endure a great deal, especially in regards to his social status. In the beginning, Jojo is portrayed as someone who is obsessed with the masculine idea of himself. As he walks around campus, he cannot help but wonder if anyone is taking notice: “Jojo walked around some more, putting a slight roll into his shoulders, hoping to

be noticed. The T-shirt he had on certainly wasn't meant to hide the fact that he was not only very tall but very buff" (59). And as he comes upon a poster of himself in a student's window, he is overtaken by a sense of godliness: "He was transfixed...couldn't take his eyes off it...Whoever it was...*worshiped* Jojo Johanssen" (59, original emphasis). Yet, Jojo is not without his insecurities. He is one of the only white players on a predominantly black team; because of this Jojo never feels completely included: "Every time the black players talked among themselves, they'd go into an exaggerated homey argot[...]The moment Jojo arrived, they'd drop it and start speaking conventional English. He didn't feel deferred to, he felt shut out" (47). At first, this "shutting out" only makes Jojo strive harder to be accepted. However, after Jojo meets Charlotte, a change comes over him. He now wants to start developing his intellectual capacities. As we will see, this change is the catalyst for many of Jojo's tribulations. Not only is Jojo's newfound sense of intellectualism problematic to the team's image, but he becomes involved in a plagiarism scandal that threatens to upend his entire career, academic and athletic.

There are several gossip related themes that play a constant and substantial role throughout Jojo's story arch. As a starter on Dupont's basketball team, Jojo is the only character who literally belongs to what Goffman would call a team: "a set of individuals whose intimate co-operation is required if a given projected definition of the situation is to be maintained" (104). Because of this, Jojo is in a state of constant performance in order to maintain the perception of what it is to be a college athlete, which includes maintaining a firm projection of masculinity. As we will see, his performance regularly takes into account moments that have a high potential for gossip. In other words, Jojo's behavior is dictated by a fear of what others might say about him. And after Jojo decides to depart from his team's act, his punishment is public humiliation brought on by nothing other than gossip. To recall Goffman: "for at any moment in their

performances an event may occur to catch them out and baldly contradict what they have openly avowed, bringing them immediate humiliation and sometimes permanent loss of reputation” (59). In addition, this public humiliation also demonstrates how Dunbar’s notion of “free riders” can operate in reverse. Namely, Jojo’s social punishment is more than just about him; it is a warning against revealing the act to the greater public. That is, Jojo missteps threaten to reveal that perhaps athletes do not need to bilk the system after all.

In *Charlotte Simmons*, athletes are described as impeccable specimens of the male physique, as Jojo’s observations of a fellow player indicate: “Treysawn was seven feet tall, agile, well coordinated, and nothing *but* muscles” (39, original emphasis). The correlation between physique and masculinity needs no further explication. However, there is another requirement that does not manifest itself so visibly – appearing devoid of any kind of academic curiosity. On this note, Adam, his tutor, explains: “Jojo wasn’t all that stupid. He just refused to use his head[...] he was also a weakling who didn’t dare violate *the student-athlete code*, which decreed that it was uncool to act in anyway like a student” (133, my emphasis). Here, we see a rule in *Charlotte Simmons* that universally applies to both males and females: social acceptability and intellectuality are at opposite ends of a spectrum. Besides these requirements of masculinity, Jojo’s situation seems to be somewhat unique in the way that he is not black. Not being black is a constant source of anxiety for Jojo, as he laments: “Not only was Jojo white, but he had very fair skin, and to make things worse, he was blond” (39). Because of his whiteness, Jojo is unable to participate in particular forms of social presentation. For instance, he explains that according to the “unspoken protocol of basketball” only the black players are allowed to shave their heads completely, only the black players are permitted to hang on the rim after dunking the ball on an

opponent (39). This inability to fully participate in the team's performance makes Jojo ever more aware that he just playing a role.

Even though Jojo does not feel accepted by his black teammates, he nevertheless attempts to maintain his status within their ranks. This means constantly preserving the image of the "student athlete code". An example of this can be seen when he intentionally answers a question incorrectly in his Modern French Novel class. This instance occurs when his professor, who assigned *Madame Bovary* by Gustave Flaubert, asks the class what drives a main character, a doctor, to perform a risky operation that costs him his reputation. Jojo begins to elucidate: "'he did it,' said the giant, 'because his wife had all these ambitions, and the thing is'" (108). Jojo stops short; he looks to a few of his "black" teammates who are also in attendance and sees them in mock celebration of his academic participation: "'Hey! Jojo read the book!'[...]'Aw-right!' said another huge black youth[...]. All three had turned toward the white giant, Jojo, and were holding out their fists so he could join in this merry mockery of scholasticism" (108). Feeling self-conscious of this "merry mockery", Jojo deliberately changes his answer to one that is blatantly unsatisfying. Charlotte, who also happens to be in the class, is taken aback by the entire occurrence: "Charlotte was aghast[...]. he was right on target. Emma Bovary's social ambitions were at the bottom of it. And then he decided to play the fool" (109, original emphasis). What Charlotte does not understand, however, is that Jojo's actions are part of a greater performance that adheres to a script, one that can and will enforce sanctions for improvisation or departure. Moreover, Jojo already feels excluded by his black teammates and answering the question correctly would have only exasperated that feeling.

Nevertheless, Charlotte eventually receives a peek behind the curtain, a glimpse into the inner-workings of the "student athlete code". Since Jojo admires Charlotte's academic ambition,



he does not want her to think of him as just an athlete, but rather as someone who shares her intellectual curiosity. To convince her of this, Jojo reveals to her the social dynamics behind his performance:

Three other players, my teammates, are in the class. It's okay to do the work, because you have to pass the courses, and you might even get away with good grades – although there's this one really bright guy on the team, and he always tries to keep anybody from knowing his grades. But you can't let anybody know you're actually *interested* in a course – you know, like you actually enjoyed the book? – then you're really fucked. (192)

As we can see from this passage, Jojo is unable to openly showcase his intellectual interests. To do so would violate the “code,” which stipulates it is “uncool to act in anyway like a student.” What is more, this performance is not just expected from Jojo, but is rather part of a broader team performance. This is evinced by the “bright guy” on the team who must work to keep his good grades in the clandestine shadows of his student-athlete image. Furthermore, hyperbolic diction such as “fucked” suggests, quite explicitly, the dangers of reprisal for anyone who decides to deviate from the act. Thus, his team regulates and monitors what is and can be socially presented by the performer.

Yet, what does Jojo's confession to Charlotte reveal about his decision to perform this way in class? To simply say that he was self-conscious about being seen acting “smart” by his “black teammates” seems reductive. For Jojo, it is not about just being seen, but about not letting “anybody know you're actually *interested*”. And one can come to know something in more ways than just by mere observation. Thus, Jojo's performance in class is largely driven by a fear that any showcasing of intelligence will be heard of outside the classroom, especially as spread by the

black classmates/teammates that will surely divulge such information to the rest of his team members. As Gluckman points out, gossip is most often “enjoyed by people about others with whom they are in close social relationship” (313). And although Jojo might not feel this “close social relationship” as intimacy, he nevertheless spends most of his time with his teammates and desperately wants to be considered amongst their ranks. Because of this, Jojo must be constantly vigilant of any potential for gossip and regulate his social performance to avoid its repercussions.

In fact, earlier in the text, Jojo recalls a similar classroom experience that occurs in high school in which a teacher, pleased with his essay, decides to read it to the class: “He could still feel how exciting and at the same time how embarrassing that had been. Luckily, *word of it* never got beyond the classroom” (57, my emphasis). As we see here, it is clearly the “*word*” that Jojo finds apprehensive; it is the “*word*” here that wields the power. And because of this, he knows that in order to keep unwanted whispers at bay, a particular performance enforced by a particular code of conduct is required. Thus, we see a similarity occur between Charlotte and Jojo in regards to social presentation and gossip. That is, gossip does not need to explicitly occur to regulate. The apprehension of its mere potential is enough to keep one in line with the script of their social sphere.

Nevertheless, Jojo is not just any kind of performer. As we saw with Charlotte, Goffman maintains that awareness of one’s performance belongs on a spectrum. At one extreme a performer can be “fully taken in by his own act” (17). At the other extreme, “we find that the performer may not be taken in at all by his routine” (17). The latter is what Goffman calls a “cynical” performer and elaborates: “the performer may be moved to guide the conviction of his audience only as means to other ends, having no ultimate concern in the conception that they have of him or of the situation” (17-18). However, Goffman quickly qualifies the definition of a

cynical performer by adding: “It is not assumed, of course, that all cynical performers are interested in deluding their audiences for purposes of what is called ‘self-interest’ or private gain. A cynical individual may delude his audience for what he considers to be their own good, or for the good of the community” (18). To imagine this kind of performer, Goffman asks his reader to think of a military recruit who at first follows commands just to avoid punishment, but then ultimately abides by the rules so his organization will not be shamed and his colleagues will respect him (20). To Goffman then, this military recruit is conscious that he is playing a role, but keeps within that role for the greater status of himself and his community. Especially in public, the military recruit must abide by a particular etiquette, if the public were to see him violate this etiquette; they may become disappointed or upset. Thus, the cynical performer performs to maintain public contentment. Jojo seems to be a near perfect correspondence to Goffman’s example here. Like the recruit, he is cognizant that he is performing, but seems to be doing so for the greater benefit of his team and public perceptions. In this way, Jojo could be considered a “cynical” performer. At the same time, however, he is also a deviation. Unlike the “cynical” performer, Jojo is not completely without concern for what the audience might think of him. This point is rendered clear by the fact that he felt the need to reveal the act to Charlotte.

Jojo’s encounter with Charlotte leads to more than just a peek behind the “student athlete code”, but to a revelation. This revelation occurs after Charlotte explains to Jojo the origins of the term “liberal arts”. As Charlotte explains it, the Romans would allow slaves to learn subjects such as mathematics and engineering for practical purposes, but would not allow them to indulge in subjects such as history, literature, or philosophy. These were subjects reserved for Roman citizens only, the free people. Such an explanation has a profound effect on Jojo: “So that’s what we are...athletes – we’re like slaves” (196). For Jojo, this discovery serves as the grounds for

pursuing academic interests and deviating from the act of the “student athlete code”. That is, Jojo can now begin distancing himself not only from the expectations of being a basketball player, but from the restrictiveness he feels from being one of the only white team members. However, as Jojo soon finds out, there are penalties to be paid for such active resistance to the “student athlete code.” As we will see, these penalties further reveal aspects of gossip and regulation.

Before Jojo can start taking upper level courses that pique his interests, they must first be endorsed by his coach. To make his case, he beseeches his coach to let him enroll in a class called The Age of Socrates: “I’m tired of – you know, skimming and scamming by the way I’ve been doing. I’m not just a stupid jock, and I’m tired of treating myself like one” (203). Not only does Jojo’s comment here reveal him consciously resisting the act, but diction such as “skimming and scamming” illustrate Wolfe’s quarrel with top collegiate sports programs. They allow for their student athletes to scam the system through bypassing the objective of a university, which is to receive an education. However, the coach is not so receptive to Jojo’s newfound ambitions: “You simpleminded shit, I got news for you. As far as you’re concerned, THIS IS THE AGE OF JOJO! You got it? You got any fucking idea what I mean?” (203). The coach’s outburst upsets Jojo, particularly the remark “You simpleminded shit.” Seeing that he has visibly upset Jojo, he then tries to placate him by explaining that he has a specific role to play on campus:

‘They see a guy like you, and they see what they gotta shoot for. Now, none a those kids are gonna get a body like yours’[...]A body like yours is a gift from God plus a lot of hard work. But that’s what they oughta shoot for. The reason our program has to put a slightly greater emphasis on the *corpore* is because it’s our

program that teaches the entire student body what protects and fortifies and energizes the *mens* and enables it to make a difference in the world.’ (206)<sup>9</sup>

Again, we see here Wolfe’s dispute with college sports programs. Not only do they feel entitled to abuse the system, but they also delude their athletes into believing that it is acceptable to do so. More importantly, we also see the reasons why the coach does not want Jojo enrolling in upper level classes. It is not just because he believes that Jojo will fail and become ineligible, but because it violates the projection of what it is to be a student athlete. That is, Jojo’s academic ambitions threaten to place the *mens* over the *corpore*, which might expose to the public that student athletes are not dumb jocks after all and do not need to exploit the system – a point we will return to shortly. Furthermore, the notion that the *corpore* should take precedence over the *mens* reconfirms the importance masculinity plays within the athletic projection. As the coach’s ridiculous statement purports: “They see a guy like you, and they see what they gotta shoot for”. Once again, we see that in the world of *Charlotte Simmons*, there can be no intellectualism in masculinity.

Even though the coach asks Jojo to “Think about your role on this campus and your obligations and loyalties in life”, Jojo nevertheless signs up for *The Age of Socrates* (207). Consequently, his defiance of the team’s code results in public humiliation. For instance, after the coach learns of Jojo’s unruliness, he makes an example of him in front the entire team during practice:

‘WHO THE FUCK YOU THINK’S YOUR COACH NOW, PROFESSOR  
NATHAN MARGOLIES? YOU’RE SUPPOSED TO BE COVERING THE

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<sup>9</sup> *Corpore* is Latin for body, whereas *Mens* is Latin for mind. The coach here is playing off the Latin aphorism *Mens sana in corpore sano*, a sound mind in a healthy body.

FUCKING BOARDS, NOT STANDING THERE LIKE A SEVENTY-ONE-YEAR-OLD GEEZER CHUGALUGGING HEMLOCK!’ (252)

Jojo does not immediately feel humiliated by the coach’s reprimand. He reminds himself that every player has had to endure his wrath at one point. Yet, he cannot help but feel mortified. This mortification however is not the result of his team’s presence, but rather the presence of third party spectators: “Out of the corner of his eyes Jojo could see three student managers at courtside drinking this all in, feasting their eyes, gobbling it up” (253). Diction such as “feasting” and “gobbling” alert Jojo to the fact that his humiliation is being watched, scrutinized, and gossiped about. He focuses especially on a student manager named Delores: “She was the one who disturbed JoJo.[...]every time he did something wrong , he would catch her snickering into the ear of one of the other managers” (253). The force behind this mortification is because now people from a lower order – “the team’s slaves” – can gossip amongst themselves and feel elevated in his presence. This is more than Jojo can bear (253). He even takes his anger out on Delores by spitting on the gym floor and demanding that she clean it up. Thus, we not only see Jojo paying a price for transgressing the team “code,” one paid by the humiliating effects of gossip, but also transferring that cost to someone else.

What is more, Jojo’s punishment in itself can be viewed as a measure to prevent public scrutiny of the athletic system. In a sense then, what we see here is an inversion of Dunbar. To briefly reiterate Dunbar’s position, he maintains that gossip is used at times to alert a community to “free riders,” people who continually exploit others. Dunbar posits that if it were not for gossip, “free riders” would quickly overtake the system. Thus, gossip is able to “exert a significant effect on free riders’ willingness to break ranks on implicit or explicit social contracts” (108). This is precisely what Jojo is attempting to do. By enrolling in a class not

sanctioned by the team, he is effectively “breaking rank” with the “student athlete code”. By publicly punishing Jojo then, the coach is chiefly preserving a system of “free riding” within Dupont basketball. That is, the players must fulfill the role of the proverbial dumb jock in order to procure special treatment. Any word otherwise could bring the whole act crashing down. This is the reason why the coach exercises the weight of his authority: to keep Jojo from exposing the act and guarantee that he will remain loyal to the team that he is obliged to. And when Jojo breaks from the routine, his punishment is public humiliation, one which even the “team’s slaves” can feast upon, gobble up, and gossip about. In this way, the “free riders” in this situation have developed their own system that alerts team members when one of their own is breaking the code.

In keeping in line with Dunbar, once Jojo’s plagiarism scandal reaches the coach’s ears, he quickly takes measures to prevent the accusation from turning into a full-blown scandal. One way he does this by personally talking to Adam to essentially tell him to keep his mouth shut: “If Jojo is penalized over...whatever has happened...you could run the risk of the same penalty” (456). However, the coach is not just looking out for the well-being of Jojo, but the entire team. This is because if Jojo is exposed as a cheater, the coach could possibly face a wider investigation into the tutoring practices that involve not just Jojo, but the entire team.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, as plagiarism and the potential for gossip threaten Dupont’s basketball team, it is gossip that eventually saves Jojo and quells any further investigation into the matter – a point we will return to shortly.

Although Jojo has been considered nothing but a mere caricature by critics, we see, as we did with Charlotte, something of a more complex nature by examining how performance and

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<sup>10</sup> Although the text does not explicitly state that other team members are engaging in such conduct, if Jojo is confirmed to be a “free rider”, it is then reasonable to suggest that a cloud of suspicion could arise that potentially stigmatize the entire team.

gossip interact with his character and how it subjects people and how people subject themselves through it. As with Charlotte, we see not only gossip, but how the sheer fear of it is able to control and regulate actions for the purpose of maintaining a specific social presentation. To do so, he must constantly place the *corpore* over the *mens*, even if he does not feel completely accepted by his black teammates. And when he tries developing an interest in the *mens* as a way to differentiate himself from the role of a college athlete, there are consequences. These consequences are a result of placing intellectual curiosity over the athletic ideal of masculinity: “A body like yours is a gift from God”. In addition, the athletic division of the university is stifling Jojo’s academic potential and teaching him to value a sense of appearance over what is suppose to be the true goal of academia, the cultivation of intellectual talents. Thus, Jojo as well illustrates how this kind of shallow formation gets to be structured, it starts with the university.

#### - Hoyte Thorpe

In *Charlotte Simmons*, Hoyt is described as an aesthetically pleasing but self-absorbed frat boy. As Charlotte can attest, he has a particular charm with the ladies, but quickly discards them after his sexual conquest has been achieved. Beyond his mistreatment of Charlotte, Hoyt plays other significant roles in the plot. When Hoyt comes upon the governor of California receiving fellatio from a student, an incident occurs between him and the governor’s bodyguard in which Hoyt manages to injure him. The quick public dissemination of the incident makes Hoyt into an instant campus celebrity. What is more, Hoyt’s newfound status is fostered by the notion of the tough-guy, which is a social presentation he continually attempts to cultivate throughout the text.

The reader is first introduced to Hoyt in a men’s room at a concert. He is looking into the mirror, absorbed by his own image: “All at once he felt like he was *a second person* looking over



his own shoulder. The first was mesmerized by his own good looks.[...]But the second him studied the face in the mirror with detachment and objectivity before coming to the same conclusion, which was that he looked awesome” (4). It is as if his “*second person*” is part of the audience. It is observing Hoyt with an objective eye, reconfirming that what he sees is the same thing everyone else does. More significantly, the “*second person*” is not observing Hoyt directly, but rather through a mirror. Thus, what the “*second person*” sees is not Hoyt himself, but rather an image, one showcasing his desired projection. Contrariwise, it does seem that Hoyt could be construed as the type of performer taken in by his own act. After all, he is “mesmerized” by his own reflection. In this way, Hoyt could be construed as a modern Narcissus.

Although there are parallels between Narcissus and Hoyt, there are also some distinct differences. Unlike Narcissus, what “mesmerizes” Hoyt is not just beauty (although that is part it), but that “he looked awesome.” In the world of *Charlotte Simmons*, “awesome” has the same connotation as “coolness” which, as we will see shortly, carries more than just a sense of beauty, but also a sense of masculinity. While Narcissus did not know that his reflection was merely an image, Hoyt, is not unaware that what he sees is only a projection; it is more that he is “mesmerized” by the fact that what he wants to look like and what he actually looks like coincide.<sup>11</sup> This is further evinced later in the text when Hoyt is ruminating on how his outward projection effectively conceals the undesirable parts of himself: “He looked so great, had such confidence, projected such an aura, had cultivated such a New York Honk, it never occurred to anyone to question his autobiography” (121). “Autobiography” here is referring to the fact that Hoyt is actually from modest stock rather than the pedigree typically associated with Dupont.

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<sup>11</sup> Interestingly enough, Goffman perhaps would consider Narcissus to be one of those social actors that is completely taken in by his performance.

What is more, we see here that Hoyt is well aware of his “projected aura” and how it can be used to transfigure reputation.

Hoyt’s exploits begin when, after a rock concert, he and his fraternity brother, Vance, return to campus and happen upon a scandalous scene:

There in the moonlight, barely twenty-five feet away, they could make out two figures. One was a man with a great shock of white hair, sitting on the ground at the base of a tree trunk with his pants and his boxer shorts down around his ankles and his heavy white thighs spread apart. The other was a girl in shorts and a T-shirt who was on her knees between his knees[...]. “Holy shit, Hoyt, you know who that is? That’s Governor Whatsisname, from California, the guy who is suppose to speak at commencement!” (7)

As Hoyt and Vance take in the scandal, they are approached by one of the Governor’s bodyguards. After an altercation in which the bodyguard suffers a broken hand as a result of a misplaced punch, Hoyt and Vance make their escape by running back to their fraternity with Vance all the while pleading: “‘We don’t’ – gulp of air – ‘talk about this’ – gulp of air – ‘to anybody’ – gulp of air – ‘right?’ – gulp of air – ‘Right Hoyt?’ (8). However, Hoyt has other plans: “He could hardly wait to get back to the Saint Ray house and tell everybody. Him! A legend in the making!” (9). As we see, Hoyt is fully aware of what the propagation of the story can do for his reputation; it can make him into a “legend”.

Yet, it is not so much what Hoyt saw that benefits his reputation, but the fact that he was able to best a bodyguard. It is this detail in Hoyt’s story that gives it a tough-guy bravado; it is this detail that Hoyt feels the need to chiefly transmit. For Hoyt, toughness is the foundation of manliness. In Hoyt’s philosophy, if word gets out that you are tough, “you’ll be able to dominate

every confrontation with nothing more than an intimidating stare” (118). What is more, toughness lets people know that you belong to the “cool team.” This is seen in one of Hoyt’s recollections of middle school in which he holds his own in a fight against four assailants: “After that he was regarded as cool by all factions” (119). Thus, for Hoyt, this social presentation of manliness is not only a way to regulate situations with an “intimidating stare”, but a way to garner a reputation that appeals to “cool” sensibilities. This is also what Hoyt means by looking “awesome”; it is not just about being physically attractive, but also about having an air of toughness, a look of manliness. More importantly, as Hoyt’s middle school recollection suggests, this image of manliness is only made possible by the power of the “*word*”.

The power of the “*word*” and its effect on the social presentation of manliness is reflected in the thoughts of Hoyt himself: “Ever since *word had spread* about how he and Vance had demolished the big thug bodyguard on what boys in the Saint Ray house now referred to as the night of the Skull Fuck, they had become legends in their own time” (97, my emphasis). In this excerpt, we see that they refer to the incident as “the night of the Skull Fuck”. This expletive directly refers to the maimed bodyguard and not the sex act performed on the governor. This is not to say that Hoyt only mentioned to his fraternity brothers the altercation of the bodyguard leaving the governor completely out the story, but rather that they placed more emphasis on the demolishing of the “big thug bodyguard”. This is because it highlights the ideals of the masculine that he embodies. Hence, we see what is central to Hoyt in the propagation of the scandal: the tough and enduring Hoyt. What is more, with the scandal’s dissemination, we see a transparent example of how rumor and gossip can be used for personal gain. This gain is the cultivation of a desired image, the same mesmerizing image that was reflected in the mirror – “which was that he looked awesome.”

As mentioned, Hoyt does not believe he is the only one that benefits from the scandal. Although Hoyt enjoys basking in his “legendary” status, he also feels that his social prestige benefits the overall image of his fraternity. This is especially evinced by Hoyt’s inner-thoughts:

They ought to all think about what that little adventure really meant. It was about more than him and Vance. It was about more than being a legend in your own time. It was about something serious. It was about the essence of a fraternity like Saint Ray[...]Fraternities were all about one thing, and that one thing was the creation of real men. (102)

This passage clearly illustrates that although Hoyt benefits personally from the dissemination of his “little adventure,” he nonetheless believes it transcends himself and ultimately benefits the entire fraternity system; it represents how the fraternity system is about the “creation of real men”. It is at this juncture that we see Hoyt performing under a code of conduct that represents what Goffman would likely call a team. Like Jojo, this is a team that puts an emphasis on masculinity, but this masculinity is not as much focused on the body as it is on raw constitution and how that speaks to the fraternal code of masculinity.

Hoyt’s need to uphold this fraternal image of manliness is demonstrated at a Dupont tailgate party. At this point in the text, Charlotte and her friends are wading through the drunken revelry when she is spotted by a lacrosse player – and Saint Ray – named Harrison. Having recognized Charlotte from a previous encounter, Harrison invites her to have a beer with the rest of the lacrosse players on the bed of a truck. As Charlotte looks over at them, she notices that their level of intoxication far outweighs her interest in joining them. Nevertheless, a lacrosse player named Mac has other plans: “‘Up we go!’ said Mac, and in that same moment he clamped his big hands on either side of her waist and lifted her off her feet as if she were nothing more

than a vase, up toward the grizzled guy and the monstrous glands of his toy penis” (332). In this passage, Mac is evidently seen here physically seizing Charlotte against her will and placing her in proximity to a toy penis. This exhibits that Mac is not just being playful, but is a serious sexual threat. Concerned for Charlotte, Harrison comes to her rescue by physically challenging Mac.

As the fight erupts, it draws a sizeable crowd, which includes none other than Hoyt. As Hoyt watches Harrison – a fellow Saint Ray – become overpowered by his opponent, he makes a conscious decision to step in and challenge Mac himself. However, as he does this, we see Hoyt once again being observed by his “*second person*”: “He loved himself as he watched himself detach himself from the ring of useless gawkers and enter the arena, a fellow warrior come to save and avenge a Saint Ray” (337). That Hoyt “watched himself detach myself” indicates that he sees “himself” as he imagines the crowd does, as a “warrior.” Thus, what we see here is an opportunity for Hoyt to “watch himself” as the crowd does and bolster both his own reputation and the mantra of the fraternity: ““His assault, even though unsuccessful, on a huge all-American lacrosse player, coming on top of the Night of the Skull Fuck, had dramatically increased the awe factor” (433-434). What is more, in regards to gossip, this scenario is markedly different from what we have seen with Charlotte and Jojo. For them, they are forced by the situation to contend with the potential presence of gossip. However, by freely choosing to fight Mac, Hoyt is instead consciously choosing to participate in a situation in which gossip will work in his favor.<sup>12</sup> In this manner, instead of being directed by gossip as a way to fit into a sphere, Hoyt is taking advantage of gossip as a way to create a broader name for his sphere. This is the difference between being directed by gossip and being able to find moments to direct it.

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<sup>12</sup> Although Charlotte does this at times as well, recall her use of Jojo in the cafeteria.

Although Hoyt seems to be an expert at presenting himself as the personification of manliness, he regularly bemoans his poor academic standing. He knows that his mediocre grades will impede his chances of securing a respectable career after college. However, Hoyt is given an opportunity of a life time. He is recruited by an investment banking company called Pierce and Pierce, which offers him a lucrative position. Struck by this amazing opportunity, Hoyt cannot help but inquire why he is being recruited, the answer astounds him: “He’s quite a fan of yours, the governor is” (450). At first, Hoyt is alarmed by the mention of the governor and believes he is being set-up. This is until he hears what the recommendation actually purports: ““He also shows his maturity in the way he handles sensitive information. He doesn’t divulge the nature of complex or delicate situations simply to call favorable attention to himself”” (451). It soon dawns on Hoyt that the governor is in fact offering him a bribe for his silence. For Hoyt, this is the answer to his academic woes.

What this transaction illustrates is how gossip works within the greater economy of exchange. In other words, Hoyt has agreed to withhold his knowledge of the governor’s sexual escapades in return for a profitable career in the investment banking world. To reiterate the view that Rosnow and Fine raised early, then, we see here how gossip (or lack thereof) can be used in exchange for “status, power, control, money, or some other resource” (77). For Hoyt, this transaction has all four of the elements that Rosnow and Fine explicitly mention, especially “status” and “money”. At least for now then, gossip’s transactional value and the power that it affords has liberated Hoyt from Dupont’s greatest quandary – the irreconcilability of intellect with “coolness.”

Even though in many ways Hoyt could be considered the stereotypical frat boy, his story and character are more complicated than they might seem. Hoyt is a character deeply involved

with an external projection of manliness that is connected to a sense of self-admiration. What is more, since Hoyt is well aware of the relation between gossip and reputation, he is able to use gossip to his advantage. This not only seen when he deliberately propagates the story of his encounter with the governor's bodyguard, but how he even creates moments for himself in social situations that reaffirm not just his intended presentation, but the presentation of the fraternity. Thus, Hoyt uses gossip to regulate the situation rather than allowing it to regulate him. In addition to using gossip to bolster his manliness, Hoyt also discovers that the transactional properties of gossip can be just as fruitful. However, as we will see in the next segment, Hoyt learns firsthand that gossip is not something that can be controlled absolutely. What is more, we see how Hoyt's mentality of manliness has been structured by the university system that claims to mold intellectual talents. The notion of collegiate fraternities initially was to uphold the values of education, but as Wolfe points out they have now become places that cultivates a culture of drinking, sex, and an inane sense of masculinity.

- **Adam Gellan**

In *Charlotte Simmons*, Adam is portrayed as a serious student with academic ambitions. As previously mentioned, he is part of a group called the Millennial Mutants, a social clique comprised of Dupont's best and brightest, or so they like to think. For Charlotte, Adam's intellectual capacity makes him somewhat attractive, as she even states herself: "She *wanted* to want Adam! She *wanted* to want to kiss Adam good night in a deeply committed way. Adam had an *interesting* mind, and *exciting* mind, an *adventurous* mind, as did his friends, the Millennial Mutants" (395, original emphasis). However, as rendered clear by Wolfe's emphasis, there is an element missing from Charlotte's ability to be fully attracted to Adam. As we saw in Charlotte's segment, this element is his lack of "cool" qualities. For Adam, this puts him more or less in last

place in the competition for Charlotte's heart. This is perhaps Wolfe abiding by a sense of realism as much as story-telling convention. That is, in life, the good guy does not always get the girl.

Even if Adam is not the object of Charlotte's heart, he still plays an essential role in the story lines of Jojo and Hoyt. As previously mentioned, Adam writes an essay for Jojo resulting in a plagiarism scandal. In addition, Adam is the one who exposes Hoyt's bribe to the public. In this segment, then, we will not only see how these two plot points are linked, but also connected to gossip.

Other than being an imperative element in the narratives of Jojo and Hoyt, Adam's character has much to say about gossip's social function. For instance, in this segment, we will see how Adam's "dorkiness" can be used to prevent unwanted gossip for athletes like Jojo. More importantly, we will also see how Adam is routinely excluded from the social spheres of the other characters. That is, as a "dork," he not only lacks the physical appearance required to be part of the "cool" team, but he also lacks the "technical language" associated with their particular form of gossip. Gluckman uses an anecdote in which he recalls being part of a riding group in Africa, he states: "I was never able to acquire the gossip among those who rode – even in the small circles of Johannesburg – and I always felt lost in the group" (309). What Gluckman is conveying here is that groups and their social activities not only utilize a technical language that reflects that activity, but they also employ a gossip-based discourse that not everyone is privy to, as Gluckman further clarifies: "The gossip which accompanies these activities is interwoven with a separate technical language" (309). Thus, part of Adam's exclusion is a result of lacking in-group jargon. However, these are not the only ways in which gossip operates within Adam's



character. This segment will also investigate how Adam utilizes gossip as a form of social transaction to subvert those of a higher social standing.

Before we get into the main points of this analysis, I would first like to briefly explore how even Adam's "dorkiness" is not just an identity that he has been assigned, but also part of his own social presentation. As we have seen with the other primary characters, social performances are enacted in order to preserve or achieve a high social standing. However, as a "dork," Adam has little to lose in regards to any status. Yet, there are still moments in which we see Adam explicitly performing. In one instance, we see Adam jump into an argument just "so that Charlotte wouldn't think he was out of it" (405). What we see here is that Adam is not just arguing for the sake of making an intellectual point, but he is effectively putting on a show, purposefully flexing his intellectual muscle in order to impress Charlotte. What is more, Adam even seems to be fairly aware that his intellectual endeavors are part of a greater performance and that the "Millennial Mutants" represent a team, even though a different team than which we have previously seen. This is evident in his explanation to Charlotte of the importance of being invited to a McKinsey recruiting weekend: "And it won't hurt to be seen there. *You* know – the word gets around that you're out there on the right track" (281, original emphasis). Adam's awareness of the link between reputation and the "word getting around" indicates that he is to some extent aware that his intellectual endeavors are part of a greater performance. Thus, like the other characters, we see how Emler and his notions of reputation and gossip apply to Adam. That is, he seems to believe that his academic future is contingent upon how the audience will ultimately talk about him. In this way, Adam is the only character in *Charlotte Simmons* who is actively looking out for his future after college. Yet, socially investing toward the future makes him a clear outsider as far as Dupont's cool team is concerned.

Unfortunately for Adam, his type of performance comes with social drawbacks, especially in the eyes of the “cool” team. As we saw with Charlotte, not only is she constantly embarrassed to be seen with Adam, but both Jojo and Hoyt also prevent Adam from feeling any kind of inclusion in their social spheres. Adam is Jojo’s all-purpose tutor, which essentially means that Adam is responsible for completing Jojo’s work for him. As mentioned earlier, Adam writes an essay for Jojo that eventually causes a scandal, but it is the manner in which Jojo convinces Adam to do this for him that exemplifies Adam’s treatment by the upper echelons of the collegiate social order: “‘Hey, Adam!’ said Jojo. He opened his arms in a gesture of welcome. The tone of his voice and the smile on his face were the sort one would ordinarily save for some dear but long-absent friend” (129). We see Jojo here treat Adam with the kind of warmth usually reserved for a friend, which in itself is a kind of social performance. This is because Jojo has a special request for Adam, one that involves writing a research essay in the next ten hours for him. After Jojo tells Adam the reason for his presence, Adam is none too happy, but feels pressured into obliging Jojo. Adam tells himself: “What did Adam the tutor amount to? He amounted to a male low in the masculine pecking order” (131). Here, we see Adam coming to an understanding that he can do nothing in the face of a Dupont celebrity like Jojo, nothing but abide. In this manner, Adam could be considered as a reputational buffer for Jojo. As Adam works diligently to keep the basketball star academically afloat, Jojo does not have to worry about being seen at the library potentially becoming the subject of unwanted gossip. Instead, he is allowed to work the system and continue to maintain the “student athlete code”. Particularly in this instance then, we see how Adam is not only exploited, but allows himself to be exploited in order to keep Jojo’s fear of gossip at bay.

However, when Jojo has no need for Adam, his kindness towards Adam becomes completely absent. This is seen later in the text when Jojo treats Adam as if he were nonexistent in the presence of the Dupont basketball team. This occurs when Adam is called to deliver a pizza to a basketball team-only party. When Adam enters their party, their social sphere, he does so as a ghost. He is received by a basketball player named Curtis Jones who barely acknowledges his presence. Wanting to show Curtis Jones that he is indeed somebody worth acknowledging, he finds Jojo in the crowd and openly addresses him: “Hey, Jojo.’ Somehow it seemed very important that the morose and intimidating Curtis Jones realized that he, Adam, knew someone here. Jojo gave him nothing but a blank stare” (184). As we see here, Adam’s attempt to establish a presence amongst Dupont’s basketball team fails miserably. Not even the player he stayed up all night writing a paper for will acknowledge him. Adam’s humiliation culminates when Jones decides that he is not even worthy of a tip. Infuriated, Adam attempts to stand up to Jones by calling out this injustice in front of the entire team. This results in Adam being further humiliated by an eruption of laughter from all sides of the party. In desperation, Adam once again beseeches Jojo in order to establish some kind of presence: “Jojo stood there like a building. Finally he screwed his lips up to one side, shrugged his shoulders, and rolled his head in the direction of Curtis Jones, as if to say, ‘Hey, it’s his party’” (185). With this final blow, Adam retreats in absolute mortification.

As we see, Adam’s role as “dork” in the text is one of exclusion. As far as the basketball team is concerned Adam is only used as a tool to maintain their “free riding” conduct. And when he attempts to establish a presence in that team, he becomes excluded and mocked. It could be said then that Jojo deliberately preserved the lines of inclusion in order to maintain social membership. That is, Jojo purposefully ignores Adam because acknowledging him would have

given him a presence in a social community that he does not belong to. What is more, there are risks involved for granting someone like Adam a presence. What if such acknowledgment made Adam think he could join in on Jojo's conversation? Knowing nothing of their social culture, what could Adam possibly contribute to their discussion and what consequences would be in store for Jojo for allowing such a thing to happen? In this way, there is more to Adam's exclusion than merely lacking the physical appearance of an athlete. Adam has not only walked in on a party, but a social activity filled with various amounts of verbal prattle. As Gluckman states, the "gossip which accompanies" these group activities "is interwoven with a separate technical language". Thus, Adam is not able engage in their social sphere. This is because Adam not only looks like a "dork", but also talks like a "dork", which something Jojo is well-aware of.<sup>13</sup> Because of this, he is considered an intrusion whose attempt to establish a presence beyond pizza delivery boy cannot be allowed. For Adam, this is also about masculinity, or lack thereof. Not only does Adam lack the required discourse, but he also lacks the toned physique, which is a requirement for the Dupont basketball team.

Later in the text, Adam once again becomes the subject of exclusion, but this time at the hands of Hoyt. In addition to being a tutor and a pizza delivery boy, Adam is also a writer for Dupont's news paper, the *Daily Wave*. As word of Hoyt's altercation with the governor of California begins to circulate, Adam sees a potential news story. Nevertheless, he cannot pursue the story without first interviewing the two students directly involved in the incident. Adam eventually tracks down Hoyt and Vance for an impromptu interview. As Adam begins asking them questions, his name in the text becomes temporarily replaced by the word "dork": "The dork turned toward Vance[...]The dork looked from Vance[...]‘What?’ said the dork" (258). This is significant because it not only establishes a clear division between their social spheres,

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<sup>13</sup> What I mean by "talks like a dork" is someone whose social discourse is concerned with academic interests.

but also indicates that his presence is unwanted. This is further indicated by the nature of their conversation in which Hoyt sarcastically withholds information regarding the incident, even though it has already been heard far and wide. Adam is not just looking for information, but is rather looking to verify a substantial piece of gossip that could be made into an excellent news story.

Yet, without the direct admission of Hoyt, Adam's story lacks anything new for people to talk about. That is, by getting Hoyt to speak on the record, Adam, like Hoyt, would be able to advance his own status by giving his collegiate peers something fresh to discuss. For Adam, it is not just the story that gets attention, but also the author who wrote it. In this manner, Adam recognizes the potential to utilize gossip for his own advancement, a point we will return to shortly. Unfortunately for Adam, Hoyt will not verify anything. Throughout the interview, he is both mocking and unfriendly. One might wonder why a narcissist like Hoyt does not take this opportunity to further advance the "legend" of Hoyt. This is something Hoyt wrestles with himself: "On the one hand, it was time to let the dork know that dorks existed on a plane...way down *there*. On the other hand, was it really so bad...to be well known" (261, original emphasis). Although it seems that Hoyt would like to give Adam the juicy details he requires, he cannot quite bring himself to do it. One of the reasons is simply because Adam is a "dork" and does not have the proper status to engage in a discussion in which the details of a significant rumor will be disclosed. In addition, the night of the Skull Fuck's dissemination has endowed Hoyt with a certain degree of power. It has brought him campus fame and greater standing within the fraternity system. Thus, another reason why Hoyt is hesitant to divulge any information to Adam is because he is hesitant to share this power with someone who exists "on a plane...way down *there*". That is, he knows Adam has something to gain from this story.

Once again, however, it not just Adam's appearance that excludes him from procuring the information that he wants, but also his inability to engage in a particular form of discourse. As Hoyt and Vance are able to gesture and speak "in a cool fashion", Adam conversely is unsure how to speak with them in a manner that they will find appealing: "'I'm Adam. I don't mean to...uh...'" (258). As Adam's botched greeting suggests, he is trying to engage with a social sphere that speaks a different social language than his own. Thus, Adam cannot find the proper words or gestures to communicate with them on an equal social level. Instead, he mumbles his way through the interview. Part of Adam's failure to obtain the information he wants stems from the fact that he cannot speak "in a cool fashion" that is part of the fraternal discourse. Because of this, Adam, at this point, is unable to discuss with them anything having to do with gossip. He is, as Gluckman might say, excluded from "joining in the gossiping or scandalizing" (313).

Awhile after Adam's botched interview, Hoyt can no longer resist the temptation of being in *The Daily Wave* and gives Adam permission to run the story.<sup>14</sup> Shortly after that, Adam receives inside information from a disgruntled fraternity member regarding the bribe (information Hoyt thinks Adam is unaware of). With the greatest story in the history of *The Daily Wave* about to run, Adam is feeling elated. However, Adam is soon faced with a much larger problem. The paper he wrote for Jojo is discovered to have been plagiarized. After agonizing over his options, Adam finally feels that it would be best to come clean to the professor making the accusation. Adam immediately regrets this decision after he learns that the professor will grant him no leniency and plans to push for the highest disciplinary action to be taken. Facing potential expulsion, Adam can do nothing but wallow in self-pity. Yet, when the story finally runs all of Adam's problems are solved.

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<sup>14</sup> It is important to note that this "permission" comes before Hoyt was offered the bribe.

The story quickly goes beyond Dupont and electrifies the nation. Not only is Adam turned into a famous journalist overnight, but the professor who holds Adam's fate in his hands is so impressed that he decides not to report Adam after all; this also saves Jojo from expulsion as well. What is more, not only does Hoyt lose the lucrative employment promised him for keeping quiet, but he is also exposed as a "free rider" to the public. Thus, by sharing this gossip through the use of media, Adam has not only saved himself and Jojo from expulsion, but has simultaneously elevated his own status while exposing Hoyt's misdeeds to the nation. However, before we completely give gossip all the credit for Adam's success, an important clarification needs to be made: is there a difference between gossip and news? Although not all news stories would or should be labeled as gossip, certain forms of journalism nevertheless do share parallels with gossip. For example, psychologists Hank Davis and Lyndsay McLeod posit that sensational news shares at least two strong qualities with gossip:

Just as sensational news is widely sought yet publicly disdained, so too does gossip trigger an ambivalent response[...]The topics people gossip and tell stories about across a wide range of cultures are virtually identical to the categories that emerged in our analysis of sensational news stories. (214)

Davis and McLeod define sensational news as the behavior an average person has to engage in order to be displayed on the front page of the news paper. Although I realize that the governor of California is not an average person, he nevertheless is not so much the center of attention as Hoyt is. This is evinced both by the headline and the image on the front page: "

POL BRIBES\$ CHARLIE WHO

\$AW HIS GROVE SEX CAPER

Underneath that, a smaller headline:

FRAT BOY WILL GET  
 95K WALL \$T. JOB  
 FOR MEMORY LO\$\$ (707)

Here, we see that the bribe that involves the “FRAT BOY” is bigger news than the actual sex act conducted by the governor. What is more, it is not the governor’s face he sees on the front page: “the entire front page consisted of a guy[...]the guy, the guy front and center—he was one...awesome dude” (708). This “awesome dude” is of course Hoyt himself. Interestingly enough, even though at this moment Hoyt knows his future career prospects have been destroyed, he cannot help but comment on how “awesome” he looks in the picture. At this point, it is as if he is truly Narcissus: so absorbed with his own image, he does not even care that his life is soon to be drowned in a flurry of social media. More intriguing yet is the conclusion that Davis and McLeod draw from their study: “Both gossip and sensational news are effective strategies for disseminating information about the behavior of group members and not allowing cheaters to remain anonymous” (214). Here, “cheaters” is synonymous with Dunbar’s notion of “free-riders”, which states that gossip helps expose people who cheat the system to the greater public: this is exactly what Adam’s story has achieved. Hence, there is indeed a connection between what we might consider sensational news and gossip.

Nevertheless, it is perhaps not clear how Adam running this story as news is connected to gossip’s transactional properties. First, we must consider that Adam ran this story only after Hoyt gave him permission to; this in itself was a transaction. In exchange for disseminating Hoyt’s tough-guy reputation, Adam received an opportunity to further his journalistic ambitions. Indeed this is a transaction that played out in Adam’s favor. In fact, it is this transaction – a transaction rooted in gossip – that ends up not only saving Adam and Jojo from their own social ruin, but



also ends up punishing the character most deserving of justice. In an interesting way then, Adam and Jojo have a similar outcome as Charlotte. Although all three characters are at times restrained by gossip, it is nevertheless gossip that helps solve their problems and allows them to maintain or achieve status, although in different ways. Although the way gossip operates to preserve and achieve status in *Charlotte Simmons* is not always cast in a positive light, we nevertheless see how it functions as a complex social regulator that goes far beyond pettiness.

Even though Adam is looked upon as the proverbial “dork” by his peers, he nevertheless demonstrates a greater complexity when viewed through the lens of gossip. At times, Adam’s “dorkiness” (or intellectual capacity) is used to maintain a more masculine presence in athletes like Jojo. As Adam heads to the library to write Jojo’s paper for him, Jojo gets to continue placing the *corpore* over the *mens* without any concern of having to look like an actual student. What is more, not only does Adam physically look like a “dork”, but he does not know the “technical language” associated with the activities of the “cool” team. Because of this, he is unable to engage in any kind of public conversation with their members, especially in regards to gossip. Thus, the “cool” team uses gossip to regulate their ranks by effectively ousting “dorks” like Adam. Despite Adam’s social exclusion, he nevertheless is able to resolve his problems while making a name for himself journalistically. In doing so, he is able to subvert the culture of shallowness that plagues the university system.

**- Conclusion:**

As this analysis has repeatedly illustrated, Tom Wolfe’s *I Am Charlotte Simmons* exemplifies how gossip is not merely a malicious act, but a complex social mechanism that monitors and regulates various functions of social groups. In Charlotte, we see notions of Gluckman and how gossip operates to both exclude and include her in the social sphere she most

wants to be a part of. What is more, we also see how Charlotte utilizes the value of reputation in an Emlerian fashion. That is, through acquiring the necessary cultural capital, Charlotte is able to modify what it is her peers say about her, which allows her to ultimately establish herself amongst the ranks of the “cool” team.

In Jojo’s case, we see the potential dangers in disobeying the modus operandi of a team’s overall social presentation. Initially, gossip is what keeps him in line with the de facto rules of the “student athlete code”. Namely, he is afraid to engage his intellectual curiosities in an academic setting because of the potential for gossip. However, as he overcomes this fear he faces other gossip-related consequences. In attempting to place the mens over the corepore, Jojo is stepping out of sync with the masculine idea of what it is to be an athlete. In doing so, he is not only putting his team’s reputation on the line, but is made to feel humiliated through gossip for doing so. This humiliation can be viewed as a form of punishment enforced by his team for potentially exposing their “free riding” conduct. In this manner, Jojo especially demonstrates how Dunbar can operate in reverse.

Unlike Jojo, Hoyt does not seem to be apprehensive about gossip. Instead, Hoyt takes advantage of gossip as a way to bolster his reputation. This is exhibited by the propagation of not only the governor receiving fellatio, but more importantly the victory over his bodyguard. In fact, it is the latter that Hoyt places special emphasis on. It is because his triumph over the bodyguard represents everything that it is to be Hoyt Thorpe – the mantra of the tough guy. This is evinced again when Hoyt decides to challenge Mac; it is not so much to protect Charlotte as it is to showcase his tough guy demeanor to not just the spectators, but to all of DuPont through the use of gossip. However, this tough guy mantra represents more than just Hoyt, but “the essence of a fraternity like Saint Ray” – the entire team. What is more, Hoyt illustrates how gossip can be

used as a type of transaction in exchange for “power”, “status”, and “money”. This is especially seen in how he takes a bribe from the governor of California in exchange for keeping any gossip about the governor to himself.

Whereas gossip could be said to affect Jojo’s and Hoyt’s masculine projections, Adam on the other hand demonstrates the social perils of lacking a masculine presence. As the proverbial “dork”, Adam is not privy to the “technical language” that accompanies social groups outside of academia. Because of this, Adam cannot join in on conversations that employ a gossip-based discourse outside of his own sphere. This is seen at the basketball soiree in which Adam is treated as a ghost despite his efforts to establish a presence. And when Adam later attempts to talk to Hoyt and Vance about the governor, he is excluded from personally being let in on the gossip because he lacks the required discourse. Despite this, Adam is able to utilize gossip in a manner that not only exposes Hoyt as a “free rider”, but also in a way that makes a name for him journalistically. Thus, Adam exemplifies how Dunbar can be used in an Emlerian fashion – that is, how one can make a name for himself by exposing others.

More importantly, each one of the primary characters in *Charlotte Simmons* reveals the social performances induced by the various regulatory functions of gossip. As Goffman maintains, there is humiliation to be had for any member of a team that makes missteps in their performance. And as we have seen, this humiliation is usually paid for by gossip. Each character in the text has demonstrated a propensity for social performances, performances that either attempt to evoke gossip or abstain from it. In both cases, these performances highlight how gossip operates as a form of regulation. At first, Charlotte is a victim of gossip – that is until she comes to understand the performance of the “cool” team. After this, she has no difficulty clicking on the “appropriate face just like that”. However, in order for Charlotte to remain part of

this team, she will now have to constantly regulate her social actions in a manner that does not jeopardize the performance. Jojo's aspiration to participate more fully in academia is hindered by what others might say for departing from the "student athlete code". For this reason, he feels obliged to act in a way that satisfies his team. And when Jojo breaks from this performance, there are consequences. Hoyt acts the part of the tough-guy. He does not only do this for self-gain, but because he believes this performance represents the mantra of the fraternity. Especially when it comes to impressing Charlotte, Adam showcases how even "dorks" are part of a broader social performance. In other words, each character illustrates how gossip and its regulative capacities at times help direct a greater social performance. In addition, we also see moments in which the power of gossip is structured. Namely, Wolfe's depiction of the university system suggests that they are being transformed into places that produce shallowness and gossip is being used to help regulate this shallowness.

Of course, there is much more to be explored in regards to gossip and power, especially from a Foucauldian standpoint. As stated in the introduction, the door is still wide open in regards to gossip's applicability to literary criticism. Those who wish to explore further how gossip is structured within different systems of power may want to start with Judith Butler's *The Physic Life of Power*. In a *Physic Life*, Butler states:

But if, following Foucault, we understand power as forming the subject as well, as providing the very condition of its existence and the trajectory of its desire, then power is not simply what we oppose but also, in a strong sense, what we depend on for our existence and what we harbor and preserve in the beings that we are.

(2).

In this excerpt, Butler is claiming that power is more than just what molds the subject from the outside and subordinates it, but is also “what we depend on for our existence.” This indeed seems to relate to gossip as a form of power. As seen with each primary character in *Charlotte Simmons*, their social “existence” is contingent upon how well they navigate the gossipy shoals of their social spheres. Even though at times they want to resist this gossip-based power, it is nevertheless the very thing that defines their existence in the social order. Keep in mind Emler: “Gossip does not merely disseminate reputational information but is the very process whereby reputations are decided” (135). Furthermore, a *Physic Life* investigates how an individual may come to resist the very power structures that produce the subject: “Where conditions of subordination make possible the assumption of power, the power assumed remains tied to those conditions, but in an ambivalent way; in fact, the power assumed may at once retain and resist that subordination” (13). Especially with Jojo, we see how he comes to resist his team and thus his existence in the social order. Hence, Butler’s assessment also may provide a greater understanding of how a subject is able to become aware of the act and resist their team. However, this is the next step that needs to be explored. But at the moment, an extended conversation on the more nuanced power aspects of gossip and regulation would take me well past the intended goal of this thesis. For now, I hope that demonstrating how gossip goes beyond pettiness and is able to regulate one’s interactions by making them perform in ways that adhere to their social communities has illustrated a new aspect of gossip’s greater function. In addition, I hope that my discussion encourages future discussion that will continue to illuminate our understanding of gossip’s applicability to literary criticism.

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