

Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature

Volume 38

Issue 2 *Self and Stuff: Accumulation in Francophone Literature and Art*

Article 6

1-1-2014

Aspiration, Consumer Culture, and Individualism in *Les Belles-Sœurs*

Julie Robert

University of Technology, Sydney, Julie.Robert@uts.edu.au

Follow this and additional works at: <http://newprairiepress.org/stcl>

 Part of the [French and Francophone Literature Commons](#), and the [Modern Literature Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](#).

Recommended Citation

Robert, Julie (2014) "Aspiration, Consumer Culture, and Individualism in *Les Belles-Sœurs*," *Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature*: Vol. 38: Iss. 2, Article 6. <https://doi.org/10.4148/2334-4415.1005>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature* by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact cads@k-state.edu.

Aspiration, Consumer Culture, and Individualism in *Les Belles-Sœurs*

Abstract

The premise of Michel Tremblay's revolutionary 1968 play, *Les Belles-Sœurs*, is a working bee. A group of working-class women gather to paste a million trading stamps, won in a sweepstakes, into booklets that once full can be redeemed for household goods. As the guests surreptitiously pilfer what they see as their hostess's underserved windfall, their actions problematize the links between the individualistic aspects of consumer and material culture and the communal values they share as members of Quebec's working class.

Taking consumer culture and material desire as a starting point, this essay considers the relationship between the individual and the collective inherent in such matters and situates it in relation to the ways in which consumer culture, individual advancement, and national projects of collective betterment, namely the Quiet Revolution, are implicitly treated in the play. It is argued that Tremblay does not resolutely condemn consumer culture as something apart from the monumental social and political changes of the era, but rather sees in the practices of consumerism aspects of collective behavior that trouble interpretations of the accumulation of material goods as selfish or individualistic undertakings.

Keywords

Consumer culture, Individualism, *Les Belles-Sœurs*, Aspirational identity

Aspiration, Consumer Culture and Individualism in *Les Belles-Sœurs*

Julie Robert

University of Technology, Sydney

In much of the critical discussion of Québécois Michel Tremblay's play *Les Belles-Sœurs* (1968), attention has come to rest on the literal expression of working class life in mid-twentieth century Montreal.¹ The provocative choice to write a play (given theatre's reputation as a bastion of high culture) in *joual*, the gritty, Anglicized and profane manner of speaking attributed to the city's Francophone working class, has become the defining trait of Tremblay's most famous work. By comparison, its subject, the question of what the play is about, has generated substantially less commentary.

The reason that the content has gone relatively unscrutinized likely has to do with the utterly banal premise of the play; the protagonists, all working-class, Catholic women from East-end Montreal, are brought together by their sister, sister-in-law, friend or neighbor, Germaine Lauzon, to engage in the menial task of gluing trading stamps, which can be redeemed for household consumer products, into booklets. Along the way, they complain about the routine of "une maudite vie plate" (24) 'this stupid, rotten life' (13), pilfer all of the stamps, and engage each other in a series of petty and frankly vicious conversations about family life and gossip. The final dramatic scene is the hostess's discovery of the theft of her stamps, perpetrated by the assemblage of women enlisted to help her paste into the booklets the million stamps that she had won in a contest.

Taking leave of traditional vectors of criticism, which have focused on the play's language and form, I wish to examine more closely the matter of content in *Les Belles-Sœurs*. Specifically, my analysis will center on the role of consumer culture, represented by the stamps and the accumulation of goods they facilitate, in revealing the tension between the individual and the collective. I situate this discussion in the context of Quebec's Quiet Revolution, a period of political modernization, secularization, and social liberalization that officially began with the change in government in the 1960 provincial election. As a social, cultural and political phenomenon, the Quiet Revolution impacted individual circumstances (for instance through its emphasis on educational reform and job creation) and had profound implications for Quebec as a nation. If this movement can be regarded as a collective project of self-improvement and Tremblay is considered a major voice of that era (as Marie-Lynne Piccione and Éleine Nardocchio argue he is), his treatment of consumer culture suggests that the women of his play are out of sync with the times in that they prioritize the frivolous accumulation of material goods for individual gain. I nonetheless argue, following theories of consumer culture, that via the acquisition of material goods, the women are

participating in processes of social and cultural redefinition for themselves while still retaining values seen as important to their society.

Stamps and the Working Bee

For modern readers, the notion of the *timbre-prime* is one that might require some explanation. These stamps, akin to today's airline frequent flyer or store loyalty program points, were collected and could be traded for a variety of goods. In the case of the stamps that were collected by Germaine Lauzon, the lucky lady who won a million stamps in a contest, they could be exchanged for household goods such as furniture, decorations, linens, appliances and electronics. The accumulation of these stamps, unlike philately, is therefore motivated solely by their exchange value. Normally stamps would be given to collectors based on their purchases; a transaction of a certain dollar amount rewarded the customer with a pre-determined number of stamps based on a ratio geared to both encourage consumer loyalty and increase spending. The consumer thus always indirectly paid for the "free" objects that could be procured with the stamps. In Germaine's case, however, the stamps were a prize, which truly makes these rewards free. This lucky break privileges her over the other women, a source of much consternation for the pasting party's attendees, who adopt as a terse and envious refrain, "J'ai-tu l'aire de quequ'un qui a déjà gagné quequ'chose!" (41) 'Do I look like someone who's ever won anything?' (33) when they reflect on the misery and dullness of their own lives.

Germaine, perhaps even unconsciously, tries to extend her privilege over the group she has co-opted to work to render her winnings exchangeable, which is to say by gluing the stamps into booklets. The working bee (or social gathering) to paste the stamps is a miserable affair, even by the standards of the equally disadvantaged attendees; the only refreshments are a few bottles of Coke (scarcely enough to allow every participant a single glass) and some chocolate and cocktail peanuts. This small reward seems hardly justifiable to the assembled group whose literal chorus of lives full of housework, child rearing and menial tasks is punctuated by yet another demand for their labor, this time as something that masquerades as a social occasion for the hostess's sole benefit. The work, moreover, is carried out in a kitchen (the site of much of their own domestic toil) and under unpleasant conditions, for despite the heat, Germaine will not open a window for fear that a gust of wind will send her stamps flying.

Given the exceptionality of the circumstances—a chance windfall—this particular working bee also stands in contrast to most collective projects of this nature, in which members of a community labor in service of a shared resource (for instance, a community garden or a school attended by their children) or as part of an implicitly reciprocal system (barn raisings). Although it is presented as a social occasion and as a collective undertaking, this working bee, even before the theft of stamps begins, is highly

individualistic and arguably selfish in its motivations. The very premise of Tremblay's play therefore, quite aside from its resolution as a free-for-all that leaves the hostess with virtually nothing (a mere three booklets) due to the guests prioritizing their own desires, presents collective action as a façade for individual gain.

Inventories of Desire

The significance of the stamps themselves, the only material objects of desire of the dozens mentioned to actually appear onstage in the play, rests entirely with their exchange value. While derided by Alanna Ulicki as being redeemable only for “useless ‘luxuries’” and “cheap junk” (104), the stamps and the products they afford are deeply significant for the women, as is enthusiastically made clear by the lucky sweepstakes winner:

J'pense que j'vas pouvoir toute prendre c'qu'y'a d'dans ! J'vas toute meubler ma maison en neuf ! J'vas avoir un poêle, un frigidaire, un set de cuisine.... J'pense que j'vas prendre le rouge avec des étoiles dorées.... J'sais pas si tu l'as déjà vu.... Y'est assez beau, aie ! J'vas avoir des chaudrons, une coutellerie, un set de vaisselle, des salières, des poivrières, des verres en verre taillé avec le motif 'Caprice' là, t'sais si y sont beaux.... Madame de Courval en a eu l'année passée. A disait qu'a l'avait payé ça cher sans bon sens.... Moé, j'vas toute les avoir pour rien ! A va être en beau verrat ! Hein ? Oui, a vient, à soir ! J'ai vu des pots en fer chromé pour mettre le sel, le poivre, le thé, le café, le sucre, pis toute la patente, là. Oui, j'vas toute prendre ça.... J'vas avoir un set de chambre style colonial au grand complet avec accessoires. Des rideaux, des dessus de bureau, une affaire pour mettre à terre à côté du litte, d'la tapisserie neuve.... (20)

I think I'll be able to take everything they've got. I'll re-furnish the whole house. I'm gonna get a new stove, new fridge, new kitchen table and chairs. I think I'll take the red one.... Oh, it's so beautiful, Rose. I'm getting new pots, new cutlery, a full set of dishes, salt and pepper shakers.... Oh, and you know those glasses with the 'caprice' design. Well, I'm taking a set of those, too. Mme. De Courval got a set last year and she paid a fortune for them, but mine will be free. She'll be mad as hell.... What?.... Yeah, she'll be here tonight. They've got those chrome tins for flour and sugar, coffee and stuff.... I'm taking it all. I'm getting a colonial bedroom suite with full accessories. There's curtains, dresser-covers, one of those things you put on the floor beside the bed.... (9-10)

The new acquisitions for the kitchen and bedroom are complemented by an expansion of her virtual collection of desired objects for the living room (stereo, television, framed velour paintings, ashtrays, lamps), the bathroom (electric razor, shower curtains, a shower itself, a bathtub, a washing machine), a child's room (furniture and Mickey Mouse-themed linens) and even clothing (bathing suits for the whole family). Germaine's breathless inventory is punctuated by almost unbelieving assertions that it will all be hers and the almost unfathomable prize of a million stamps gives rise to a feeling that not just *anything*, but *everything* will be available to her. Never does a calculation of what can realistically be acquired with the stamps enter the narrative, despite the fact that questions of cost (in the form of discussions of comparison shopping, scrimping and saving) are otherwise a prominent feature of the dialogue and emerge as points of pride for the women ("T'es donc bonne pour trouver des bargains!" [92] 'You always find the bargains' [90]).

For the other women in attendance, the stamps seem to remain more of a real-world commodity in that they still figure into calculations of cost. The objects they covet, while potentially as frivolous or tacky as some of Germaine's desires, have a price attached to them. Rhéauna Bibeau (a spinster neighbor), for instance, justifies her theft of exactly three booklets worth of stamps by insisting: "Après tout, y m'en manque juste trois pour avoir mon porte-poussière chromé" (104) 'Oh what the heck. Three more books and I can get my chrome dustpan' (103). For the steadfastly religious Rhéauna to shun the most elemental of Christian teachings (thou shalt not steal) for the sake of a chrome-plated dustpan seems particularly absurd and further places individual desires above the rules of the community.² That almost every other woman pockets some stamps suggests that they, too, are prioritizing their individual desires over the rules of their still quite religious society and the cohesion of their group. This irony, of course, is the crux of Tremblay's critique of the mentalities common among the working class of the era: his own class.

In Germaine's case, her wildly aspirational contemplation of the exchange value of her stamps and the off-putting manner in which she boasts of her good fortune are only the starting point of what Renate Usmiani characterizes as "her unlimited greed" (129). As the play progresses, Germaine's statements about her projected possessions become more hyperbolic and even less tethered to any sense of the realities (economic or practical) at play. Any need that arises is addressed by adding the "required" object to the register of desires. In most cases, what is being tacked on to the list is increasingly laughable, especially in terms of its utility. Her sister Rose's complaint about needing to cut her lawn with scissors because she can't afford a lawn mower prompts Germaine—who lives in a third-floor walk-up—to muse: "Moé, j'vas en avoir, une tondeuse, avec mes timbres...." (46) 'I'll be getting a lawn-mower with my stamps....' (39). When the folly of

this particular situation is pointed out, Germaine's response is not to offer the free lawnmower as a gift to her sister, but rather to promise Rose that she would be able to borrow her new mower whenever she needed it. Desire becomes desire for its own sake and the need to accumulate as many prizes as possible becomes a motivation that overrides family ties and common sense. The lucky sister's greed becomes the laughable pinnacle of her selfishness, for not only would the lawnmower be useless for her, it would likely be an encumbrance in her small apartment. Holding a negative use-value for its would-be owner, the lawnmower's worth comes from its unparalleled signification of Germaine's privileged status over her sister.

The boasting, theft, and irrational greed that Tremblay showcases are undoubtedly withering portraits of the group of women and by extension a certain segment of Québécois society. His critique of this group is a clear condemnation of the ugly—read individualistic—side of materialism and consumer culture that has dominated much of the critical discourse on the topic.³ I nonetheless argue that the subjects of consumer desire and consumption are, following the work of both theorists and historians of consumer culture, an ideal canvas for sketching the tensions between the individual and the collective.

Consumerism and Social Change: Individual and Collective Meanings

The characters of *Les Belles-Sœurs* are emblematic of Montreal's working class during the lead-up to the Quiet Revolution. This classification, as borne out in the critical literature, frames the women in terms of lack: lacking education in their speech and attitudes, lacking social graces in their interactions, lacking satisfaction with their circumstances. The women, though, would have been unlikely to see their situation in these ways, save for the third condition, a dissatisfaction that inspired an enthusiastic but necessarily limited participation in consumer culture.⁴ Through their involvement in this phenomenon, the women cultivated the belief that consumer activity and the accumulation of goods could lead to improvements to one's life, both in absolute and relative terms. Indeed, this is Julie Rodgers's contention of the role of shopping in the works of fellow French Canadian writer Gabrielle Roy. Although the more skeptical critics of consumer culture dismiss this as only an illusion, history points to many cases where consumer activity was part of a positive collective movement. Magda Fahrni's work on the grocery boycotts in 1940s and 50s Montreal (the approximate temporal setting for the play), for instance, is a geographically and temporally relevant example of how individualized benefit via consumerism was both motivated by and influential in terms of larger collectives. Fahrni argues that rationing and price controls during the Second World War had honed consumer sensibilities and gave rise to women-led protest movements against high prices on essential goods among the working and middle classes of Montreal.

In a more general sense, consumerism has always been a process of manipulating intrinsic social meaning. Jean Baudrillard contends that contemporary societies operate via “une logique de classe qui impose le salut par les objets” (*La société de consommation* 78) ‘a class logic which imposes salvation by objects’ (*The Consumer Society* 60), such that members of the lower and middle classes consume material goods in order to differentiate themselves from or to affiliate themselves with various groups. From this foundational position, most theories of consumer culture hold that transformations of the self, one’s social world, and circumstances could be effected through the appropriation of goods. The acts of buying and possessing goods, which have been called possession rituals, allow people to “move cultural meaning out of their goods and into their lives” (McCracken 79). Consequently, the desire to accumulate is not so much an economic exercise, but a project of social identity formation undertaken within the context of community and social groupings. Celia Lury encapsulates the social dimension of individual possession when she argues: “individuals create a personal world of goods that reflects their experience, concepts of self and the world. Such rituals help to establish an individual’s social identity. And it is in rituals such as these that the performative capacity of goods is made visible” (15). When more traditional avenues for forming and performing one’s social and cultural identity are blocked, for instance due to the isolation caused by home-based labor and relative disenfranchisement (the case among the majority of women in Quebec during the mid-century years), consumer culture takes on an even greater role in these processes. Donica Belisle argues that “for many poor, working, and middle-class women ... consumption has been vital to social activity and cultural identity” (187). Insofar as culture and society are always inherently about a group beyond or greater than the individual, consumption—no matter how selfish in its motivations or its practice—is a process that will always have implications for the collective.

Given the ways in which consumerism both has been and continues to be a phenomenon that is deeply engrained in collective consciousness and collective action, it should be situated within a framework of collective, namely social and cultural, meanings. Instead of following the trend looking at the consumption of material goods in a Manichean light that opposes, on one hand, materialism and consumerism, and on the other, collective political action, there is redeeming potential, as Nicole Ollivier suggests, in seeing individualism (consumerism) as a fundamental part of social (collective political) movements.⁵ The second part of this essay accordingly examines more closely the semiotic work of commodities in *Les Belles-Sœurs* and draws on the debates about the individualizing nature of consumerism versus its status as a collective social phenomenon to link it to the projects of individual and collective self-improvement that are attributed to Quebec during the Quiet Revolution.

Buying Betterment

Les Belles-Sœurs opened in Quebec in 1968, arguably the end of the Quiet Revolution in political if not cultural terms. This period of rapid social and political transformation, which is generally accepted to have begun with the election of Jean Lesage's Liberal government in 1960, entailed a mass secularization of social institutions, the expansion of the provincial government into areas of responsibility formerly administered by the Catholic church (health care, education, social services), sweeping educational reforms, and the nationalization of key primary industries. Critics such as Éline Nardocchio, Rachel Killick and Renate Usmiani maintain that Tremblay's play is an expression of the Quiet Revolution's aims to have the Québécois at all levels of society take ownership of their own culture, language, society and economy. Michèle Martin's study of the play's critical reception noted that most local reviewers, suffused with the modernizing and change-oriented discourse of the time, saw it as a didactic tool, a wake-up call or a spur to action, which emphasized, through satire, that "each individual was responsible for the improvement of his/her own situation" (124). It is nonetheless through this individualistic self-betterment that larger social transformations would be effected at the national level, for instance with a more educated and skilled workforce. In the play, however, the large-scale concerns of the era are generally eclipsed by more immediate projects and the main characters are clearly depicted as being out of touch with issues facing Quebec as a nation. Indeed, the only avenue for self-improvement is consumerism. Rather than dismissing this process as bringing only illusory gains, however, it is worth considering how it is part of the collective processes occurring in Quebec at the time.

Despite the ostensible separation of the older generation in the play from the political action of the Quiet Revolution, there are some echoes of the movement in Tremblay's dialogue. Germaine's nephew Raymond, the son of her sister Gabrielle who is in attendance at the pasting party, is said to be pursuing education at one of Quebec's classical colleges. Although most of these secondary schooling institutions were phased out after the 1964 Parent Commission report on education, the emphasis on education serves as a reminder to audiences of the concerns contemporary to the play, namely the reform and promotion of education for all students in the province, including at the post-secondary level. For these absent but mentioned characters, particularly those still in their young years (who would, moreover, come of age with the start of the Quiet Revolution), the path to both collective and individual self-improvement is clear, rational and in keeping with the accepted strategies of the day.

The play's younger female characters—Linda (Germaine's daughter) and her friends Lise and Ginette—also openly declare that they seek to improve their lot in life. Their desire is to marry well and to have more than their mothers. Lise, for instance, proclaims her resolve:

Mais j'veux tellement sortir de ma crasse ! Chus t'écoeurée de travailler au Kresge ! J'veux arriver à quequ'chose, dans'vie, vous comprenez, j'veux arriver à quequ'chose ! J'veux avoir un char, un beau logement, du beau linge ! J'ai quasiment rien que des uniformes de restaurant à me mettre sur le dos bonyeu ! J'ai toujours été pauvre, j'ai toujours tiré le diable par la queue, pis j'veux que ça change ! (90)

All I ever wanted was a proper life for myself. I'm sick of working at Kresges. I want to make something of myself, you know, I want to be somebody. I want a car, a decent place to live, nice clothes. My uniforms for the restaurant are all I own, for Chrissake. I never have any money, I always have to scrounge, but I want that to change. (88)

Her desire for change is articulated in the trappings of a consumer lifestyle, which suggests that the women of her generation are likely, despite their best intentions, to find themselves in the same situation as their mothers. Her insistence on change nonetheless parrots the political campaign slogan of Lesage's Liberals from the 1960 election, "C'est le temps que ça change" 'It's time for change,'⁶ and therein hints at a more engaged way forward, if only by breaking with tradition (in Lise's case by seeking out an abortion rather than arranging a speedy marriage *à la* Florentine Lacasse).⁷ For these two groups of offspring (and admittedly more for one than the other), there is a vaguely political orientation to their actions and ambitions.

For the adult women at the center of the play's action, however, the quest for self-improvement is almost exclusively channeled through consumer culture and the accumulation of goods. Their relative poverty and overall situational inertia though, means that "they can only count on good luck to improve their fate: a windfall of gold bond stamps, or maybe a win at bingo" (Usmiani 136). In light of the climate of change in the province that was spurred by, among other factors, violent labor disputes (notably the strikes at Asbestos, Thetford Mines and Murdochville) and intellectual and artistic leadership (as expressed in publications like *Cité libre*, *Parti pris*, *L'Action nationale*, and *Le Devoir*) the thought of generating substantive change via prizes and cheap material goods comes off as laughable, indeed a folly of selfish and individualized gain. As Éleine Nardocchio bitingly points out: "Ces femmes ne cherchent essentiellement qu'à agrémenter leur vie sans y apporter des changements profonds" (345) 'Essentially, these women seek nothing more than to brighten up their lives without instigating deeper changes.'

These limits to substantive change in a truly political sense notwithstanding, Germaine's material desires speak clearly to the project of social identity formation and improvement that she is undertaking. In this, she

is participating in a social form of consumption with meaning for the collective. Returning to the long wish list of items Germaine enumerates for her sister Rose, she breaks from her cataloguing of items to offer some qualification about what exactly she wants and why: “j’vas avoir des plats en verre soufflé ! Ben oui, pareil comme ceux de ta belle-sœur Aline! Pis même, j’pense qu’y sont encore plus beaux!” (Tremblay 1972 20) ‘I’m gonna have the same crystal platters as your sister-in-law Aline! I’m not sure, but I think mine are even nicer’ (10). The housewife’s rationale for acquiring the platters has virtually nothing to do with their intrinsic or use value (much akin to the situation with the lawnmower), and rather has everything to do with how owning them will position her, as defined by her material possessions, relative to Aline. The measure of “success” in this regard is not only to match but to outdo the aesthetic quality of the other woman’s platters.

A similar motivation, albeit more complex, is exhibited in relation to her desire for a set of drinking glasses: “des verres en verre taillé avec le motif ‘Caprice’ là, t’sais si y sont beaux.... Madame de Courval en a eu l’année passée. A disait qu’a l’avait payé ça cher sans bon sens.... Moé, j’vas toute les avoir pour rien !” (20) ‘Oh, and you know those glasses with the ‘caprice’ design. Well, I’m taking a set of those, too. Mme. De Courval got a set last year and she paid a fortune for them, but mine will be free’ (9-10).⁸ The glasses are recognized as being nice, but quite costly—a trait that would elevate the constrained speaker/owner to the status of one who can afford nice things. Identical glasses had previously been purchased by Lisette de Courval, the snobby member of the group who boasts of having travelled to Europe and of owning a mink stole. This implies that possessing a set of these glasses will put Germaine on equal footing with her seemingly more privileged rival. The imitative value of cut glass is unspoken, but also operates in the larger cultural system of signs that gives commodities meaning. Visually indistinguishable from its much more expensive counterpart of cut crystal, cut glass gives the drinking glasses a signification of being objects not of working or even middle-class life, but of upper-class status. This unacknowledged layer of signification was likely a motivating factor for Lisette’s original purchase of the glasses, for she had always sought to use her consumer activities to associate herself with groups and classes positioned higher on the social ladder than her own. The construction of a social identity is therefore based on competitive acquisition; to have items of a certain or better quality than others of one’s entourage is regarded as the measure of a more privileged, even enviable, status. To surround oneself with the trappings of a better life, according to the cultural logic of these women (and of much of Western society at the time) was to *have* a better life.

Before condemning Germaine’s consumer desires as a game of pure one-upmanship, it is worth noting that the characters, like the actual mid-century Montreal consumers Fahrni studied, also use consumer behavior to reassert collective values in the face of rapidly changing circumstances. For example, one might expect, particularly given Germaine’s loss of all sense of

household accounting when it came to her stamps, that her windfall would cause her to throw financial caution to the wind. Her rationalization for acquiring the “Caprice” glasses (because she will “pay” for them with free stamps) while it was folly for Lisette de Courval to do so (she paid too much for them) illustrates how thriftiness and frugality are continually valued as facets of working-class identity. The apparent contradiction of Germaine’s position signals an ambivalence about the use of consumer products to create a differentiated identity from other members of one’s class, for although the accumulation of material goods acts as what Lury terms a “carrier of interpersonal influence” (16) and such aspirations are common to the members of the group, betraying common values to achieve this is seen as worthy of reproach. Indeed it is for this reason that Rose chides Lisette: “On le sait que ton mari se fend le cul en quatre pour pouvoir emprunter de l’argent pour te payer des fourrures pis des voyages! C’est pas plus riche que nous autres pis ça pète plus haut que son trou!” (48) ‘We know goddam well your husband’s up to his ass in debt because of your mink stoles and trips to Europe! She’s got no more money than the rest of us and she thinks her farts smell like perfume!’ (41). The collective resists the individual’s attempts to forge a new or “better” social identity by making disparaging comments and thereby intimates that “the systematic appropriation of the meaningful properties of goods” (McCracken 80), at least in this social system, cannot occur.

The failed attempts to transfer the meanings culturally ascribed to goods to those who possess or consume them point to the ways in which Tremblay critiques the excesses of consumer culture. At the same time, however, he sees in its more conservative or judicious iterations the qualities that have allowed the working-class Québécois to cope with their relatively limited economic means. Just as *joual* is both valorized as a language of cultural expression thanks to its use in the theater and made an object of ridicule thanks to the play’s portrayal of its speakers, consumer culture is treated in a similarly equivocal way. It promotes community-destroying individualism at the same time as it uses the community as its point of reference to give objects their meaning. It can be practiced in a way that valorizes the consumer among her peers or in a manner that denotes her being out of step with the esteemed traits of her social group. Tremblay keeps the individual in tension with the collective in his discussion of consumer culture and resists narratives that would place the women of *Les Belles-Soeurs* entirely outside of the movements of class-consciousness and collective action that gave rise to the profound social changes brought by the Quiet Revolution.

Conclusion

Michel Tremblay’s career-defining play satirized working class life in mid-century Montreal and shined a bright but generally disparaging light on the one avenue, that of consumerism, the women saw as a means to improve their lives. Germaine proved unsuccessful in her attempt to utilize collective

labor and shared aspirations for material gain because it was against and at the cost of others in her group that she tried to refashion her own self-image and social position via the accumulation of material goods. Consumerism in the sense of competitive collection of material goods thus emerges as a source of family rivalries and neighborhood jealousies. Through the theft of the means of accumulation and procurement, individualistic desires fracture the group's cohesion and become a focal point for ridicule of each woman's materialistic foibles.

Consumerism, understood as a process of identity formation via social position and the transfer of qualities from objects to owners, however, also underpins attempts to form more positive social identities for oneself. Moreover, it is through the collective exercise of consumer culture that both individuals and society have come to benefit from movements such as consumer protection. Motivated by class-defining values such as thrift, these movements had a tremendous impact on forging Quebec's social and commercial landscape. The relationship between the individual and the collective that Tremblay presents is therefore not as straightforward as might be gleaned from readings of the play that emphasize only the frivolity of tacky household objects and stamp economies.

Notes

1. The play's title can be translated as 'The Sisters-In-Law,' but the translation retains the original French-language title.
2. This conclusion is made all the more galling when one thinks that Rhéauna had threatened to end a 35-year friendship with Angéline Sauvé (also a spinster neighbor, but with more liberal inclinations). Angéline is a secret patron of nightclubs, but because the parish priest had preached about the evils of such places, Rhéauna vows never to speak to her again if she continues to frequent the clubs.
3. On the negative social and cultural consequences of consumer culture, see Vance Packard's *The Waste Makers*, T.J. Jackson Lears's *The Culture of Consumption* and William Leiss's *The Limits to Satisfaction*.
4. The working-class women of Quebec were also likely to have experienced only a late and more restrained entry into the post-war boom of large-scale consumer culture thanks to the lower wages paid to Francophone workers and, owing to larger family sizes, more of the family budget needing to be devoted to necessities such as food, clothing, and medical care. Canadians in general though, explains Joy Parr, were significantly later in joining the American-led shift to consumer culture.

-
5. By way of illustration, Ollivier notes how many of the major labor disputes in Quebec during the 1940s and 50s were motivated by, among other things, individuals seeking improvements to their own material circumstances in the form of wage hikes. Fahrni similarly argues that “women used their intimate knowledge of their household finances to demand better social welfare measures and a reasonable cost of living” (483) in postwar Quebec.
 6. All translations other than from Tremblay’s *Les Belles-Sœurs* and Baudrillard’s *La Société de consommation* are my own.
 7. Florentine Lacasse is the young female protagonist of Gabrielle Roy’s foundational novel, *Bonheur d’occasion*. When she finds herself pregnant and abandoned by her lover, she quickly gets married to another man and replicates the system of marriage and motherhood that resulted in her own mother’s unhappiness.
 8. The translation does not employ the ellipses used in the original.

Works Cited

- Baudrillard, Jean. *La Société de consommation: Ses mythes, ses structures*. Paris: Gallimard, 1970. Print. Trans. C.T. *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*. London: Sage, 1998. Print.
- Belisle, Donica. “Toward a Canadian Consumer History.” *Labour/Le Travail* 52 (2003): 181-206. Print. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/25149387>
- Fahrni, Magda. “Counting the Costs of Living: Gender, Citizenship, and a Politics of Prices.” *Canadian Historical Review* 83.4 (2002): 483-504. Print. <http://dx.doi.org/10.3138/chr.83.4.483>
- Killick, Rachel. “In the Fold? Postcolonialism and Quebec.” *Romance Studies* 24.3 (2006): 181-92. Print. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1179/174581506x147597>
- Lears, T. J. Jackson. *The Culture of Consumption: Critical Essays in American History, 1880-1980*. New York: Pantheon, 1983. Print.
- Leiss, William. *Limits to Satisfaciton: An Essay on the Problem of Needs and Commodities*. Montreal-Kingston: McGill-Queen’s UP, 1988. Print.
- Lury, Celia. *Consumer Culture*. 2nd ed. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 2011. Print.
- Martin, Michèle. “Modulating Popular Culture: Cultural Critics on Tremblay’s *Les Belles-Soeurs*.” *Labour/Le Travail* 52 (2003): 109-35. Print.
- McCracken, Grant. “Culture and Consumption: A Theoretical Account of the Structure and Movement of the Cultural Meaning of Consumer

- Goods.” *Journal of Consumer Research* 13 (1986): 71-84. Print.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1086/209048>
- Nardocchio, Éleine F. “*Les Belles-Sœurs* et la Revolution Tranquille.” *L’Action nationale* 70 (1980): 342-51. Print.
- Ollivier, Nicole. “Individualisme et mouvements sociaux.” *Nouvelles pratiques sociales* 3.1 (1990): 53-60. Print.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.7202/301069ar>
- Packard, Vance. *The Waste Makers*. New York: Donald McKay, 1960. Print.
- Parr, Joy. *Domestic Goods: The Material, the Moral, and the Economic in the Postwar Years*. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1999. Print.
- Piccione, Marie-Lynne. “La Femme canadienne-française chez Gabrielle Roy et Michel Tremblay, ou la remise en question des valeurs familiales traditionnelles.” *Études Canadiennes/Canadian Studies* 1.2 (1976): 39-46. Print.
- Rodgers, Julie. “In Defence of Shopping: A Consideration of the Pleasurable, Playful and Empowering Potential of Consumerism in Selected Works by Gabrielle Roy.” *Nottingham French Studies* 52.1 (2013): 97-112. Print. <http://dx.doi.org/10.3366/nfs.2013.0042>
- Roy, Gabrielle. *Bonheur d’occasion*. 1945. Montréal: Boréal, 1993. Print.
- Tremblay, Michel. *Les Belles-Sœurs*. 1968. Montréal: Leméac, 1972. Trans. John Van Burek and Bill Glassco. *Les Belles-Sœurs*. Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1991. Print.
- Ulicki, Alanna. “Linguistic and Cultural Transfer in Michel Tremblay’s *Les Belles Sœurs*.” MA Thesis Ottawa: U of Ottawa P, 1997. Print.
- Usmiani, Renate. “The Bingocentric Worlds of Michel Tremblay and Thomson Highway: *Les Belles-Sœurs* vs. *The Rez Sisters*.” *Canadian Literature* 144 (1995): 126-40. Print.