**How 19th-century women used department stores to gain their freedom** By Erin Blakemore

Some 70,000 people, most of them women, showed up for the opening of Wanamaker's "Grand Depot" in 1876. The Philadelphia department store was astonishing, lit by thousands of gaslights, filled with furs and gloves and fabrics, and filled with music, thanks to a gigantic pipe organ.

But as much as women enjoyed being catered to by carefully dressed attendants and lounging at the 1,100 seats inside to talk over their purchases with their friends, they were actually doing more than shopping. They were experiencing a new kind of freedom—one ushered in by the concept of department stores.

The idea of freedom through consumerism sounds preposterous today. But in the 19th century, department stores represented a new opportunity for middle- and upper-class women. The luxurious retail palaces were among the first urban spaces where women could move around without the "protection" of men outside the home. They ushered in changes in consumption and culture that made women more powerful than ever before.

Life at the time was largely sex-segregated. Men were responsible for money and commerce, while women were expected to keep and socialize in cozy homes. Much of that work involved turning dry goods like flour into food, or fabric into clothing. Servants were responsible for heading outside the home to shop and run errands, and traveling salespeople brought some goods directly to the home.

The home wasn't just comfortable: It was considered the only safe place for women. This protection was more figurative than literal; at the time, just being looked at by an "undesirable" person was considered an insult to "respectable" women. As cities grew, so did perceived threats to women's safety. When women did venture out onto city streets, they were expected not to linger. In the words of historian Jessica Ellen Sewell, "negotiating the streets was nearly impossible."

Middle- and upper-class women were expected to go into the streets only with an appropriate chaperone, and many stores, restaurants and public places were closed off or even illegal for them to enter. "Proper etiquette discouraged women from lingering on sidewalks, stopping to look into store windows, handling merchandise, and even carrying packages," writes historian Emily Remus.

But in the middle of the 19th century, industrialization began to change the kinds of products available, bringing more variety and more consumer goods, like disposable trinkets and mass-produced clothing, into stores. More products created a need for more buyers to sustain a new consumer economy. In response, stores decided to target a novel market: the prosperous woman. If women were given a socially acceptable, safe place to shop, retailers reasoned, they would learn about and buy new products.

This led to the creation of an entirely different kind of store. The new department stores couldn't have been more unlike the dreary dry goods stores where men once congregated. They were large, clean and appealing, with many different types of goods under one roof that were organized into departments. And their inventors realized something earlier retailers did not: Shopping could be fun.

Savvy retailers like Harry Gordon Selfridge and Rowland Hussey Macy made these stores a seeming extension of the home in order to assure women that shopping there would not harm their reputations. Staffed largely by women, the stores featured luxurious, but homelike furnishings like carpets, lounge chairs and comfortable private dressing rooms. Prices were fixed, so women were not expected to haggle or, in some cases, even handle money. The stores were staffed with security guards and became, in the words of Boston department store owner Edward Filene, an "Adam-less Eden."

Retailers soon realized that the more homelike the atmosphere, the more likely a woman was to linger. In response, they outfitted their stores like plush extensions of home. The Emporium in San Francisco, for example, contained a nursery, an emergency room, a post office, a beauty parlor and a library. Marshall Field's in Chicago had a full-scale information bureau and featured multiple places for women to dine and take tea. And separate smoking rooms and even entrances offered men a place to enjoy themselves without disturbing or endangering the women within.

Shopping soon became a popular way for women to get out of the house. Retail palaces had big plate glass windows with rotating displays and window shopping was born. Suddenly, it was socially acceptable for women to be out on the street. Restaurants and theaters that once were closed to women realized that shopping women could be customers, too. They began catering to women and even offered alcohol to drink—an innovation that did away with another social taboo. More women began to use public transportation, frequent hotel lobbies, even go to banks.

With that newfound mobility came economic power, too. This new economy created jobs for women and made it possible for single women to live and work outside their parents' homes without endangering their reputations. Over the years, women became the primary consumers for their families, and brands started to vie for their attention and their dollars.

Once women became shoppers, they overwhelmed the marketplace. Today, up to 80 percent of all consumer purchasing decisions are made by women—an illustration of the immense power unleashed by department stores and the generations of women that followed the first department store shoppers.

Ironically, though, the department stores that helped turn women into shopping powerhouses with a spending power of up to $20 trillion worldwide may be in their waning days. As legacy retailers like JCPenney and Sears shutter, the days of glamorous showcase shopping seem far away. But the freedom they helped to give women has only grown —and these days, a woman doesn't even have to leave the house to flex her consumer power.

**Questions: These are to be submitted to turnitin.com**

**“A Pair of Silk Stockings”**

1. The shopping spree Mrs. Sommers goes on clearly has an effect on her personality and characterization. Choose one line/piece of evidence that best reflects this.

2. What might the last line of the story mean?

3. What message is Chopin sending her audience in this short story? (in other words, what is the theme? Hint: the last line may be helpful)

**“How 19th Century Women . . .”**

1. What did you find interesting or surprising in this article?

2. What is the main idea of this article?

3. Based on reading the short story and the non-fiction article, what is one idea both authors would agree on? Why? Disagree on? Why?

4. How are both texts (the short story and the article) related thematically? Think about the overall, more meaningful message of these pieces and how they are connected. (#3 and #4 are helping you with synthesis for when you get to the essay)