**Short Description of the Project**
This module was developed for a graduate class in material culture in response to the Rutherford challenge. The seven students enrolled read *The Ladies’ Paradise* in its entirety, noting the types of goods sold in the fictional Parisian department store. Each week, one student was responsible for presenting two chapters from the book, which has fourteen chapters. At the end of the seventh and final week of reading, each student selected an artifact from the university’s historic costume and textile collection that represented typical fashion items sold in department stores at that time. Preference was given to artifacts that resembled items that were part of the story line. Students researched the artifacts and presented their findings to each other. Abbreviated final papers with images are available on Digital Commons at http://digitalcommons.uri.edu/ladies_paradise/

**Introduction and Full Description**
*The Ladies’ Paradise* is a novel by Émile Zola set in Paris during the Second Empire. The novel’s title is also the name of the fictional department store around which the story is based. Specifically, the book focused on the 1864–1869 period. Zola conducted his own research at Le Bon Marché, the Paris department store founded in 1852, which was apparent in his detailed descriptions of store operations and the merchandise on offer. A summary of the novel can be found in Appendix A.

Department stores at that time devoted substantial floor space to yard goods. Customers bought yardage and trims to take to their own dressmakers. Although apparel manufacturing was still in its infancy, some departments offered ready-made clothing such as women’s cloaks and children’s clothing. The goal of incorporating this novel into the class was to introduce students to products sold in the early department stores. The focus for the assignment was to research an artifact that resembled something that might have been sold in a department store during the Victorian era.

To amplify student understanding of the setting, the instructor delivered a lecture on the growth of the department store in the nineteenth century, and students read one chapter of Susan Porter Benson’s *Counter Culture* entitled “‘The New Kind of Store’: 1850–90” (Benson 1986: 12–30). Everyone read *The Ladies’ Paradise* from start to finish. Each week a student reported on two chapters from the book, focusing on the descriptions of the merchandise. Since students used different editions of the book, slight variations in translations were apparent; discussions about terminology ensued. After finishing the book, each student chose an object from the historic textile and costume collection that represented the type of object sold in the Ladies’ Paradise. Especially desirable were items that represented part of the story line and/or were made in Paris. The University is blessed with a very large historic textile and costume collection that is especially strong in nineteenth-century fashion.
Several points of discussion emerged in addition to issues of translation. The various departments mentioned in the book were discussed from week to week along with the growing list of types of goods sold. The story described a pattern room, a workroom, and a small manufactory that operated in the eaves of the store, leading us to believe these early department stores had small workrooms within the buildings themselves. Denise, the protagonist, was constantly running up to the pattern room and workrooms to fetch articles of clothing for the ready-made women’s department where she worked. The most vexing question for us was how to determine if something in our collection was ready-made. We know that the Ladies’ Paradise carried some ready-made goods in addition to the fabrics and trims sold in its thirty-nine departments because Denise works in the women’s ready-made department. Eventually she is put in charge of the children’s ready-made department.

The instructor and students looked in the collection for artifacts with store labels, patented buttons, or manufacturer stamps. After hours-long searches, we settled on:

- a parasol of the type displayed at the great sale. It is made of black silk moiré trimmed with silk fringe.
- a woman’s cape or mantle. Capes and mantles were one of the first ready-mades for women (Kidwell and Christman 1974). They are mentioned throughout The Ladies’ Paradise. A cloak features in the story when Denise is called to alter a ready-made cape at the home of Madame DeForges. The cape selected for the project had a label identifying it as “Au Bon Marche.”
- a woman’s white corset manufactured by a prominent American corset maker, the Worcester Corset Company of Worcester, Massachusetts. This corset was typical of the type of ready-made corsets on display during the white sale described in the book.
- a pair of gloves made by a top glove maker in France. These gloves were worn as wedding gloves in 1877. The stamped label reads: “Grande Medaille d’Honneur Trefousseole,” size “6.”
- a pair of cloth boots of the type that Denise purchased when she had earned enough money to buy herself a new pair of boots to replace her country footwear.
- a section of a hand-made lace border similar to the lace stolen by Madame de Boves when “ravaged by a furious, irresistible passion for dress.”
- a child’s white pique dress of the type offered in the children’s department in the white sale. Zola described the scene as “a riot of white, enough to dress in white a troop of shivering cupids, white cloth cloaks, white piqués and cashmere dresses, sailor costumes and even white Zouave costumes.”

Students researched their selections using E. McClung Fleming’s material culture model, which they had been using on previous assignments (Fleming 1982). The model has four steps: identification, evaluation, analysis, and interpretation. These are used in tandem with five properties: history, material, construction, design, and function. In earlier assignments, students followed the model closely, but for this particular project, they were encouraged to move away from step-by-step reporting. Students presented their findings to the other students in class. Later, they submitted a full-length paper, and an
abbreviated version of their paper for uploading to Digital Commons. After minor editing by the instructor, the papers were uploaded to the site “The Ladies’ Paradise: Artifact Study” which can be found at http://digitalcommons.uri.edu/ladies_paradise/ Images of the artifacts are included.

**Evaluation**
As with the other class assignment, the instructor evaluated the student papers as follows:
- Incorporation of the four steps and five properties of Fleming’s model
- Accuracy of analysis and conclusions
- Quality of writing (spelling, grammar, organization of information)
- Number and range of references
- Citations and references
- Submitted by deadline

The students were asked to reflect on the module. Their responses are included in Appendix B. The students expressed great interest in the novel’s story during the weekly reports, particularly the trials and tribulations of the heroine. They also thought long and hard about what items to select for their individual projects. Identifying a ready-made object from the many label-less objects in our collection was a challenge that resulted in students viewing all objects of a certain type (e.g. parasol) before selecting the most appropriate one for the project as a whole. Students learned how to photograph their object for the abbreviated article that was to go up on the project web page. One student became so intrigued by the project that she intends to develop and curate a small exhibition of ready-mades for our gallery, and she plans to work on the problem of identifying “ready-mades” her thesis project.

**Conclusion**
This module, or a similar module requiring the reading of a novel to study historic costume, is appropriate for an upper- or graduate-level class at universities and colleges that have textile and costume collections. It introduces the material culture method, which provides a systematic way to study artifacts for cultural meaning. The project provides a hands-on experience that incorporates both literature and material culture. The faculty member should have a background in fashion history, knowledge of the material aspects of historic textiles/costume, and an appreciation for literature. The university should have a historic costume collection, space for students to work, and a well-stocked library with fashion history titles so that students may research their artifacts.

This activity was introduced as a response to the Rutherford challenge. It worked very well, even beyond expectations. The instructor will utilize this book or books by other authors such as Edith Wharton or F. Scott Fitzgerald because it makes the artifacts come to life.

**References**


Appendix A

Summary of The Ladies’ Paradise by Émile Zola

Émile Zola’s The Ladies’ Paradise was published in 1883. However, the story is set in Paris during the Second Empire, when Baron Haussmann was modernizing medieval Paris into the beautiful city we know today. Specifically, the period covered in the book is 1864–1869. A feature of urban development occurring in Paris at this time—as well as in London, New York, and other major metropolises—was the department store. Early department stores grew out of family-owned businesses and limited partnerships that parlayed their small retailing establishments into vast emporiums that covered whole city blocks. Leading examples of this new retail venue are Harrods (London, 1849), Macy’s (New York, 1858), and Le Bon Marché (Paris, 1852), all of which were designed to appeal to the growing number of middle class consumers.

The Ladies’ Paradise is many things. It is a love story between the heroine, Denise Baudu, and the store’s owner, Octave Mouret, who seduces women through the fashionable goods sold in his store. The book explores class structure and changing values in rapidly industrializing Western Europe. The reader also learns how a fictional department store operates in the 1860s. The author provides in-depth descriptions of how sales people were recruited, paid, housed, and fed. He reveals the interpersonal and hierarchical relationships of the staff. He describes the types of departments in the store as well as the items for sale. Zola provides information on how goods were received, inventoried, sold, and delivered. He describes the mail order department, the workrooms on the upper floors, and the cafeteria where the workers are fed. He gives rich descriptions of the shopping behavior of the women who frequent the store, including some who shoplift. The endnotes in the version I read explained that Zola had spent time researching at Le Bon Marché; thus, the reader can assume that the descriptions are an accurate portrayal of department stores at that time.

Department stores crowded out the small shops that for centuries had provided urban dwellers with fashionable goods. Denise Baudu is a country girl who comes to Paris with her two brothers after their parents’ death to seek employment in her uncle’s shop. It is a fabric shop, which is slowly withering away in the shadow of the nearby Ladies’ Paradise, whose Wal-Mart like tactics of working closely with suppliers and making small margins on large sales volumes is killing the small shops. Denise secures a position at the Ladies’ Paradise in the ready-made department, but faces derision for her country appearance. She lives in the store, yet is constantly short of money for the support of her younger brothers, one of whom is boarding with a family. Denise is fired after management discovers her after-hours job of sewing neckties for a specialty shop. She is forced to move to a nearby hovel with a small custom umbrella shop on the ground floor. Some rooms are rented to women of ill repute, and the reader sees how easily young women fell into prostitution at this time. Denise stays true to her high moral standards, and works in the umbrella shop for a short period, then for a former employee of the Ladies’ Paradise who set up a fabric shop using his connections with the silk
manufacturers of Lyon. A chance meeting with Mouret has her back working at the Ladies’ Paradise where she excels, eventually becoming the head of her own children’s wear department. Mouret falls in love with her, but she resists becoming his mistress despite his repeated attempts to seduce her. Gradually he gives up his philandering ways, and when he finally proposes to her, she declares her love for him at the rather abrupt conclusion of the book.
Appendix B

Student Evaluations

Student 1
I found using *The Ladies’ Paradise* as a catalyst for research very effective. Reading a fictional account of history, and subsequently finding facts and artifacts to support it, makes any interesting discoveries more significant somehow. The engagement between researcher and research material is often seen as routine. The addition of an interesting story line, whether fact or fiction, is always welcome in such a project. In the case of *The Ladies’ Paradise*, the social and commercial aspects of the fashion business in the late nineteenth century were given many voices, rather than a more singular perspective one would find in a textbook on fashion history.

Student 2
It was interesting to read about the types of fashion sold at the Ladies’ Paradise and to compare those items to what we have in the Collection. It brings the story to life and helps recreate each department’s goods. I thought this was a great learning experience in terms of identifying them in our historical textile setting.

Student 3
It was an interesting challenge to find objects within the collection that are relevant to the Ladies’ Paradise. Reading a novel that is contemporary to the objects themselves shed new light on the attitudes towards these objects in the period and provided a unique view into the commercial context in which these objects would have been bought and sold.

Student 4
As I read through the book, I felt as if it was a treasure hunt to find pieces in the collection that were mentioned in the book. It was rewarding to find pieces that matched up to the story, just knowing that our own university’s collection had them was a treat. It was interesting to read how the garments and accessories sold at the Ladies’ Paradise were incorporated into display of the store as well. Learning what could be considered “ready made” was also an incredibly interesting challenge.

Student 5
It was very helpful to learn about the apparel industry through the format of a novel. I mostly appreciated the competitiveness that was brought out by the development of the department store. It was also nice that we have many of the items discussed in great length within our collection to pair with the book, enabling an interactive and visual learning tool.

Student 6
This project we did matching objects from the HTCC with objects in *The Ladies Paradise* was an exciting and engaging way to not only approach costume history, but literature.
While researching objects and reading fiction are both exciting in their own right, combining the two made for a meaningful discussion of costume history. Being able to identify in our collection objects that were like those discussed in the story brought the objects and the story to life.

*Student 7*
In a typical classroom situation you do reading and complete assignments. Looking at objects from the period in the collection added a dimension to the learning experience that never would have happened otherwise.