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"The External Feminine": An Examination of the Life and Times of the Twentieth-Century New University Woman through Cecil Clare Crane

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“THE ETERNAL FEMININE”:
AN EXAMINATION OF THE
LIFE AND TIMES OF THE
TWENTIETH-CENTURY NEW
UNIVERSITY WOMAN THROUGH
CECIL CLARE CRANE



*Cedar Marie
Woodworth*



ON A TWENTIETH century, midwestern land-grant college campus where physical vigor, scientific investigation, upstanding moral conduct, and athletic prowess were chief concerns of the culture and measures of success, where does a literary mind, more importantly, that of a woman, find her place? Who was Cecil Clare Crane of Bryan, Ohio? Posing this question is akin to asking a much larger one: Who was the “new university woman” at the turn of the twentieth century and what traditional roles or alternative subcultures may she have embraced? In what ways did she work to subvert or perpetuate gender norms? Who were her friends,

companions, and lovers during this period of great change in our nation's history? Using Cecil as a lens and representation of the new university woman, I am looking specifically to describe and speculate about aspects of her personal life and the experiences she and her fellow female classmates, or "coeds," had at Purdue University. Through representations of close readings of primary archival materials, I will detail several snapshots of Cecil's life. These sections will include an introduction of Cecil, portraits of life in the women's residence hall and literary societies at Purdue, and the relevance of Cecil's senior thesis on the illustrious French woman, George Sand. Finally, coming full circle, I will describe the implications of post-university life, explaining Cecil's existence as a seeming "every woman." Cecil Clare Crane was a student, a woman, a literary scholar, a mother, and a wife. She embodies an entire stratum of her generation. She is a thousand women; she is me, and she may very well be you.

Who Was the New Woman?

At the turn of the century, a "new" type of woman was emerging. New women "conducted themselves with a new independence and assertiveness . . . by shopping in department stores, smoking in public, playing tennis, expressing interest in sexuality, earning advanced degrees, entering traditionally male professions, calling for social

and political reforms, or agitating for the ballot. Self-development, not self-sacrifice, was the New Woman's watchword."¹ Cecil and other coeds at Purdue University and across the country helped usher in this new generation of women who held themselves to higher standards of education, awareness, and opportunity. Seen as revolutionaries by some and headaches by others, these women were both celebrated and harshly denounced. In a satirical take on those who feared the New Woman, Purdue's student newspaper, the *Exponent*, reflects several criticisms in a story in which the "horrors" of those who "turn out to be coeds" are described. Such women "lose their dignity and womanliness, they take up the coarse ways of the boys, they use slang and chew gum and wear box-calf shoes and short skirts and rain-coats and toboggan caps and—and they sit on the bleachers at the games and jump up and yell—think of it! . . . they study Physics and Mathematics and Chemistry and work in laboratories."² Facing these judgments and perceptions, new women strove to gain independence and succeed academically and physically, while still remaining socially acceptable.

Cecil Clare Crane

Cecil Clare Crane, the daughter of Francis H. and Samuel Crane, a bookkeeper, was born in Bryan, Ohio,

on October 20, 1883. Around 1891, Cecil and her family relocated to Lafayette, Indiana, where she attended the city high school, eventually entering Purdue University in the fall of 1900 as a freshman member of the class of 1904. During her time at the University, Cecil was an integral part of literary Purdue, and as her *Debris* yearbook cameo states, she was “one of our esteemed.” Cecil was also involved in the Philaethan Literary Society, Purdue’s newspaper (the *Exponent*), and the production of the 1904 *Debris*. In the campus tradition of bestowing titles upon seniors, she was crowned winner of the “funny girl” contest and runner-up in the “laziest girl event.”³ Featured alongside many of her classmates in a piece of anecdotal verse crafted to incorporate their names, she was described as a “solitary CRANE.”⁴ Cecil is also noted in the *Debris* as having “a lively spirit of humor . . . [she liked] to take a shy at her classmates in the form of roast.”⁵

“Art of Entertaining” by the Hall Girls

Ladies’ Hall, constructed in 1872 as Boarding Hall, was the first building on campus erected north of State Street. It was originally home to the college dining room, faculty living quarters, and president’s office when Purdue opened its doors in September 1874. The building was also known for a time as Art Hall when



FIGURE 1. LADIES' HALL ON A SUNNY DAY. COURTESY OF PURDUE LIBRARIES ARCHIVES AND SPECIAL COLLECTIONS.

various drawing and cooking classes were taught in some of the rooms on the first floor. However, for the majority of its existence, it was used as the women's residence hall. All of the coeds living on campus in 1904, including Cecil, resided here. Ladies' Hall was much more than a simple dormitory; it was the stoic witness of personal and intellectual growth and the lighthearted antics and adventures of the hall girls and their companions.

In capturing the spirit of the University, the 1904 *Debris* features a section that playfully attributes hypothetical book titles to "student authors" in the class of 1904; one such selection is entitled "Art of

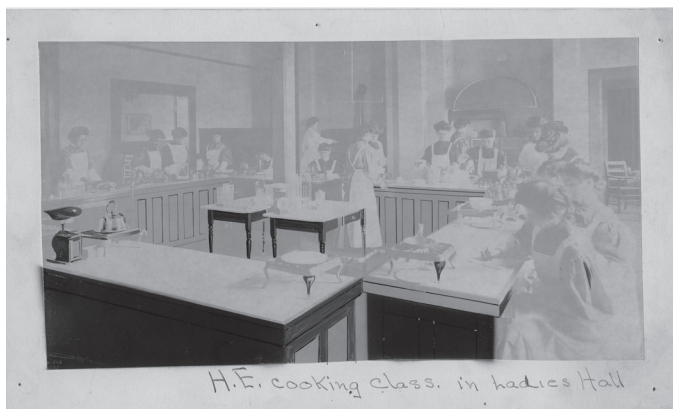


FIGURE 2. COOKING CLASS IN LADIES' HALL. COURTESY OF PURDUE LIBRARIES ARCHIVES AND SPECIAL COLLECTIONS.



FIGURE 3. A GROUP OF COEDS CROWD TOGETHER FOR A PHOTO (*DEBRIS* 1904, 254).

Entertaining" by the Hall Girls, and another is entitled "Cupid's Garden, or, The Back Yard of Ladies' Hall" by a pair of male students.⁸ Well known for their hospitality and parties, the ladies gave "chafing dish luncheons" for visitors⁹ and farewell dinners for departing female faculty members.¹⁰ A group referred to as the "Basement Sisters" even "gave a birthday spread for Miss Crane [one] Wednesday."¹¹ After a fair amount of research, I am still only able to speculate about who the Basement Sisters may have been—perhaps a subset of the literary society or an intimate group of cohorts who assembled in the nether regions of Ladies' Hall. Either way, the community of Ladies' Hall women developed ardent relationships. As expressively characterized in the *Exponent*, each woman looked to the others for a soul who "thinks the same of you in sadness as in joy and one in whom your confidence is as firm as in your own self. One who laughs with you, and one who weeps with you. One who is as eager to sacrifice for you as you are for her and, finally, one who thinks with you and with whom you think."¹²

Out of these close bonds rose an affable culture, which included a few hall traditions. One of particular importance was the infamous "college girl's fudge." The crafting of college girl's fudge commenced with "a skirmish for alcohol"—as each suspiciously claimed that "mine has all evaporated"—followed by a "perfect

serenity and rustle of skirts.” The ever-popular chafing dish was then called to duty, “the scent of chocolate inspiring,” as they gathered “all the sugar that could be gotten from boxes and sacks,” and called for “butter, nuts, [and] dates, left from midnight feasts [to] come forth.”¹³ The fudge’s elevated standing in women’s college culture is depicted in the following 1904 *Debris* illustration entitled “An Engineer’s Idea of a Girl’s Head.” The drawing features the typical thoughts of a coed. Fudge has a prominent place among her chief considerations, which also included theatre, traveling men, “clothes, lots of ’em,” mathematics, polo, frat men, and “hair, more hair, preferably brunette.”¹⁴

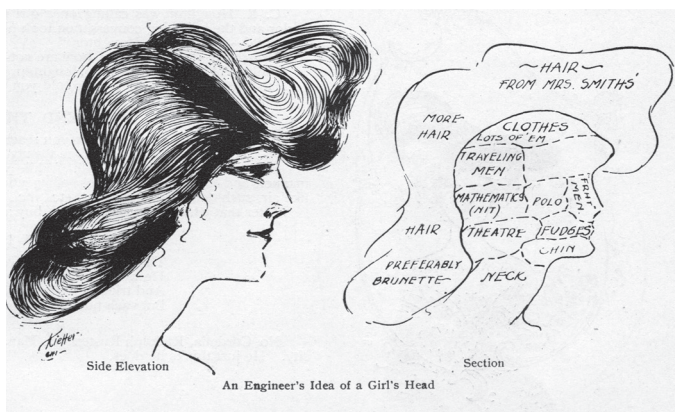


FIGURE 4. “AN ENGINEER’S IDEA OF A GIRL’S HEAD” (*DEBRIS* 1904, 301).

Aside from fulfilling traditionally feminine roles and stereotypes, the coeds also sought to establish a physical culture of their own in response to the increasing zeal for "real" masculinity and athleticism. Raising questions about the proposed construction of the new Memorial Gymnasium they asked, "will we find a place? . . . will there be no room that the Purdue girl can call her own, no room where we can meet for physical training and where we can have a basket ball team. . . . If Purdue is open to girls, should they not be offered inducements, outside of their studies, such as are given by other coeducational institutions?"¹⁵ Their requests were apparently followed by action, as the following *Exponent* issue announced that, "The young women of the University have organized a physical culture class. . . . The 'coeds' are to be congratulated on their spirit of aggressiveness, as an effort last year to organize such a class was a total failure. The class enrolls almost every girl of the University. It is thought and hoped that a basket ball team will be started and a regular schedule will be made up with the different colleges over the state. Why shouldn't the girls, as well as the rest, hang athletic scalps in the library!"¹⁶

The spirit of the coeds and their escapades lived on right up until the demolition of Ladies' Hall in 1927. A couple of later highlights include an event in which some of the residents in the '20s dressed up as colonial



FIGURE 5. A GROUP OF COEDS DRESSED IN TRADITIONAL COLONIAL GARB. COURTESY OF PURDUE LIBRARIES ARCHIVES AND SPECIAL COLLECTIONS.

men and women, and another that led to a mysterious January 1913 *Exponent* article featuring the indelicate headline, “Coeds in Kimonos Clamber to Roofs and Put Out Fire.”

Literary Life

Cecil, along with many of her fellow coeds, was very engaged with the literary culture at Purdue, and she worked as an editor for the *Exponent*, which began

featuring a "Girls' Page" during her time on the staff. Cecil also worked with the Philalethean Literary Society, of which she was president, and as the literary editor in the 1904 production of the *Debris*.¹⁷

Commenting on Cecil's newspaper involvement, the *Debris* calls her "a wielder of the paste and shears," praising her for affording "entertainment for many by her apt selections for the exchange pages of the *Exponent*."¹⁸ As the exchange editor, she was responsible for choosing small news clips from other college newspapers across the country to include in the *Exponent*. As a result, Cecil controlled some of the flow of information onto campus. We can get an impression of Cecil's voice from her various selections and commentary; through the pieces she found interesting enough to include, a sense of her humor and personality may be gleaned. One particular piece of humorous social commentary can be found in the December 3, 1903, exchange pages from an address about prominent Victorian art critic and theorist John Ruskin by Dr. Hillis in the *Ohio Wesleyan Transcript*: "The time is past when men can say that men alone work and think, and that 'man must work that women may spend.' Man is the most conceited form of biped that the world ever knew. He asks all the women in the universe to stand around and worship at his little shrine. There was a man in England by the name of Lord, who

invented a tool. After inventing that tool, he signed himself Lord, Jr., to distinguish himself from the lord almighty—Ex.”¹⁹ This piece, signed “Ex”—presumably for “Exchange Editor”—amusingly jabs at antiquated gender roles while communicating a sense of change in attitudes toward women. On Purdue’s campus, further development of the publication of women’s voices can be seen in the advent of the “Girls’ Page” in the *Exponent*, beginning in February 1904. Over many issues, the page covers a broad range of topics and seeks to recognize, distinguish, and strengthen the women’s community on campus. One specific sentiment reflective of the slowly maturing recognition of feminine independence at Purdue states that, “Woman is, by nature, frail and timid and it is not her place to be out, unattended . . . ” however, “Is this the state of affairs at Purdue? Most decidedly, it is not.”²⁰

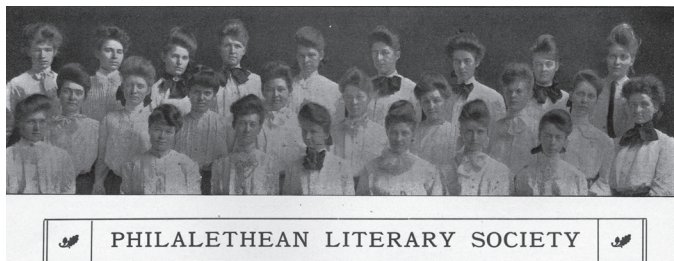


FIGURE 6. THE 1904 PHILALETHEAN LITERARY SOCIETY (*DEBRIS* 1904, 196).

Many of the coeds were also involved in the Philalethean Literary Society, which was not only a lively source of literary discourse and expansion on campus, but also a key facet of social life at the University. Along with the Carlyle, Emersonian, and Irving male literary societies, the women held debates, balls, and joint meetings, which were sometimes opened up as spectacle to University students and faculty. During one such rendezvous between the Philalethean women and Irving men in mid-February 1904, the "conversationings" included poetry readings, piano duets, recitations, and a debate in which it was "Resolved: That Valentine Day should be perpetuated." Following the conclusion of the debate, refreshments were served, "consisting of ice cream, moulded in heart shaped form, with cake and candy."²² The groups also hosted Literary Annivals each year during Gala Week, a time in which life was "supreme in every phase of interest" and about the college grounds was "the greatest spirit of good cheer and joyousness that may be imagined."²³

George Sand in Indiana

In contrast to the seemingly lighthearted activities of the literary society, Cecil's senior thesis gives us a more earnest, personal sense of her through the close examination of its subject matter on the well-known French

author, George Sand. Among other things, Sand's works challenge and explore the exclusion of women from the "masculinist discourse of politics," sexuality, principles of feminism, monogamy, class equality, and "the gendered conflict between idealism and realism."²⁴ Sand smoked cigarettes and had a long list of lovers; she was "reviled as a lesbian" and a "man-eater" and known for dressing in traditionally masculine clothing.²⁵



FIGURE 7. AN 1864 PORTRAIT OF GEORGE SAND. COURTESY OF GEORGE EASTMAN HOUSE COLLECTION. AVAILABLE FROM GALLICA BIBLIOTHEQUE NUMÉRIQUE.

Literary subject matter was quite influential and, as reported in the *Exponent*, a lecture was given on campus stating that, "A book is valuable as a piece of literature just in proportion to its capability of entering into and becoming a part of one's life. Intelligence has, therefore, the same moment in choosing one's reading as in choosing one's friends."²⁶ With this notion in mind, Cecil may have found, in researching the author and characters featured in her senior thesis—*The Idealism of George Sand*—companions of sorts: like-minded women of extremely different circumstance with whom she shared the struggle of defining eternal femininity.

Cecil's forty-one-page thesis, handwritten in delicate script, begins with an introductory description of Sand. "She had a rare genius,"²⁷ Cecil wrote. "She had a receptive mind and infinitely good, she became the organ of all reforms, which seemed for the good of humanity . . . to see how great the influence of a woman can be . . . none can be more interesting than that of . . . George Sand."²⁸ After establishing this tone of praise, Cecil goes into much detail about Sand's life, casually describing several facets that would likely have been considered quite controversial. George Sand had a "dislike of conventional ideals"²⁹ and "she received no religious education whatever." Eventually, "she imagined a being who would represent all perfections, human and

divine. To this being she gave the name ‘Corambé,’ and for several years she cherished this fantasy. She erected an altar in a thicket and there offered as sacrifice the release of birds and butterflies that had been taken as prisoners.”³⁰ After mentioning Sand’s period of self-conceived religiosity, Cecil describes Sand’s early teenage years at the convent school she attended in Paris. Here Sand became “the leader of the gayety and of the set called the ‘devils,’ she herself earning the nickname of ‘madcap.’”³¹ Upon return to the French countryside, Sand broke up her daily responsibilities at home with “armless horseback rides” in which “she was fearless. [Sand] donned a boy’s riding costume, which raised an outcry from the village folk . . . here it was [she] learned to look with contempt on the narrow restrictions laid down by the village social code.”³²

Such open challenges of standardized religion, modesty, and gender performance were also evident in Sand’s writings. In particular, Cecil acclaims *Lélia*, a controversial work by Sand that follows a woman named Lélia who, as described by contemporary critics, “appears in some ways to be trapped in transition between the place of the traditional woman and that of the modern.”³³ In this state of New Womanhood, Lélia is “trying to find a space in which she can exist as something other than the object of someone’s desire, trying to find also

her voice."³⁴ Cecil comments that, "*Lélia* is a strange, incoherent and magnificent poem, in which spirituality falls low and sensuality aspires high, where we pass from scenes of debauchery to lofty prayer and where inspiration rises high only to fall to the depths. *Lélia* is a mysterious heroine . . . into this book [Sand] claims she has put more of her own self than in any other work."³⁵ In these important analyses, Cecil finds commonality with her subjects. Arguably the most significant lines of the thesis are found when Cecil poignantly characterizes Sand's body of work as a whole, saying her pieces "show the fortune of the poor and great human heart, the conflict of the living soul with fate, the revolt of nature against the fatal errors of society; they protect against everything that shackles the free movement of true love. Each is a poem consecrated to divine love and human love and [Sand] says herself, 'they were written under a sway of emotion not of a system.'"³⁶

Cecil's idealistic, methodical treatment of Sand's scandalous lifestyle, upbringing, and writings show that she herself may have been attracted to a subversive culture, or was at the very least comfortable with a woman's departure from traditional expectation. Discussing such unconventional topics in an idealistic manner reflects the changing interest of the New Woman and the progression of thought.

Graduation and Beyond

In the aforementioned section of the *Debris*, which attributes hypothetical book titles to students, Cecil also had work credited to her authorship—"Changed Heart"³⁷—a title that perhaps comments on her appearance in the yearbook under the "Matrimonially Inclined" section in the "Lovelorn Damsels" category.³⁸ The object of her affection and cause for her change of heart was Walter H. Schulte, a dashing, athletic pharmacy student in the Purdue class of 1905. Schulte was "from the Evansville Dutch, and . . . [had] a liking for anything in petticoats, especially 'college widows.'" As defined by *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, a college widow is "a young woman in a college town who dates students of successive college classes." Such may have been the case for Cecil, who was one year his senior. In addition, Schulte was also a member of the pharmacy football team (1904) and the pharmacy editor of the 1905 *Debris*.³⁹

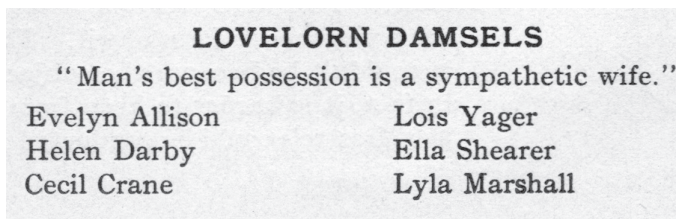


FIGURE 8. THE "LOVELORN DAMSELS" AWARD (*DEBRIS* 1904, 298).

Cecil's *Debris* cameo ends with a brief statement saying, "When she finishes here she expects to indulge in school teaching for a time, unless—."⁴⁰ In this mysterious-sounding ending, I would like to think that Cecil was imagining herself in an expatriate literary group on the Left Bank in Paris, but undoubtedly, she means "unless—" she marries.

After graduation, Cecil did in fact "indulge" in teaching for a while in Lafayette, residing at 223 North Sixth Street from 1904 to mid-1912, presumably continuing her courtship with Walter, whose 1905 *Debris* cameo fittingly states, "his favorite resort is Sixth Street, and it is not difficult to tell which end of it."⁴¹ Census data indicates that Walter returned to Evansville, Indiana, after graduating in 1905 and began work as a pharmacist, eventually opening his own pharmacy, called W. H. Schulte Drug Co., sometime between 1912 and 1916. Cecil appears to have continued teaching in Lafayette up until the end of the school year in 1912, presumably moving to Evansville over the summer. She and Walter were married on October 29, 1912. The review of periodic censuses and several *Purdue Register of Offices and Alumni* yield similar information for the coming decades: "Mr. W. H. Schulte, PhG, and Mrs. W. H. Schulte: Homemaker" lived at 1519 East Delaware Street in Evansville, just a few

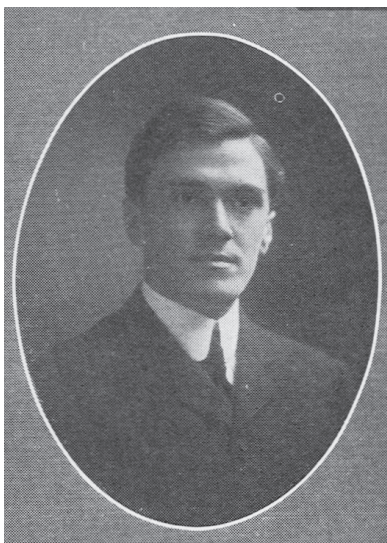


FIGURE 9. SENIOR
PORTRAIT OF WALTER
HUGO SCHULTE
(*DEBRIS* 1904, 132).

residences down from the pharmacy, which was located at 1521 East Delaware Street. The Schultes had three children: Walter Crane (b. 1914), Frances Ann (b. 1918), and Betty Clare (b. 1921).

When I eventually reached the *Register* entry that listed Cecil as “deceased,” I felt a surprising amount of sadness. I came to the sharp realization that in a matter of hours, I had covered the statistical entirety of a woman’s life. Despite the bare sketch of her life that we can construct from archival records, through her contributions to the *Exponent*, and her extensive senior thesis, I felt

that I had also gained an impression of who she was, or at least, a sense of her humor, interests, and some values of personal importance. While trying to understand the connection I felt, I was attempting to explain the positions of archival obscurity in which Cecil and many other university women eventually found themselves when I suddenly understood: these women did not simply "find" themselves in some condition; they embodied, to the best of their abilities and talents, the circumstances that they were allowed. As the women themselves reflect in the *Exponent*, "Woman's influence over man is supreme. She made Ceasar [*sic*] fall at her feet while the armies of the world trembled before him," and her "greatest influence is exerted in the home. It is there she wields such a mighty influence in shaping the destiny of the world. It is there that the individuals who compose the nation are nurtured and when they gain in power and influence, the nation must likewise be strong and prosperous."⁴² This notion is conceivably the most important sentiment of all. Regarding a woman who has been epithetically reduced to "homemaker," a single noun in the English language under the "head of the house," and concluding that she lacks profound importance, on par with that of her college years, is altogether unjust. The women of the early twentieth century helped build this country, within the limited visible authority they were afforded, in the

home. Cecil may have been simplified, like so many other women, in the obscurities of tradition and societal structure, though regardless of her eventual position as an “every woman,” viewing Cecil and her fellow coeds as new women during their years at Purdue lays the framework to understand them, not as a “types,” but as *women*, full human beings. One may speculate with confidence that Cecil was a revolutionary under her own roof, maintaining a brilliant literary mind as a caring mother, an equal companion to her husband, and a community presence.

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Notes

1. John Kasson, *Houdini, Tarzan, and the Perfect Man: The White Male Body and the Challenge of Modernity in America* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002), 13.

2. “Strange Things Will Happen,” *Exponent* (West Lafayette, IN), Feb. 11, 1904.

3. *Debris*, 1904, the Virginia Kelly Karnes Archives and Special Collections Research Center, Purdue University Libraries, 247–48.

4. *Ibid.*, 253.

5. *Ibid.*, 75.

6. “Exchange Pages,” *Exponent* (West Lafayette, IN), Mar. 3, 1904.

7. *Debris*, 1904, 254.

8. *Ibid.*, 285.

9. “The College World,” *Exponent* (West Lafayette, IN), Feb. 18, 1904.

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14. “An Engineer’s Idea of a Girl’s Head,” *Debris*, 1904, 301.

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18. *Ibid.*
19. "Exchange Pages," *Exponent* (West Lafayette, IN), Dec. 3, 1903.
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25. Jeanne Fuchs, "George Sand: Notorious Woman, Celebrated Writer," *The Coast of Utopia* 43 (2006): 1.
26. "The University," *Exponent* (West Lafayette, IN), Jan. 14, 1904.
27. Cecil Crane, "The Life and Works of George Sand" (senior thesis, Purdue University, 1904), 2.
28. *Ibid.*, 3.
29. *Ibid.*, 8.
30. *Ibid.*, 10.
31. *Ibid.*, 11. Purdue had its own, very different set of "devils." A group of male students known as the Dormitory Devils were responsible for terrorizing Purdue students at the turn of the century. It is possible that Crane was struck by the similar name in her research and the very different kind of group it represented for Sand versus the "boys" culture at Purdue.
32. *Ibid.*, 12.
33. Eileen Sivert, "Lélia and Feminism," *Yale French Studies, Feminist Readings: French Texts/ American Contexts*, no. 62 (1981): 47.
34. *Ibid.*, 48.
35. Crane, "The Life and Works," 22–23.

36. Ibid., 22.

37. *Debris*, 1904, 247–48.

38. Ibid., 298.

39. Ibid., 132. Famed Purdue Alumnus George Ade wrote a play called *The College Widow* in 1904. After finding success on Broadway, it was made into a film, and was recently restaged here by the Purdue Theater Department.

40. Ibid., 75.

41. Ibid., 132.

42. “The Girls’ Page,” *Exponent* (West Lafayette, IN), Feb. 18, 1904.