Dawn Powell, a little-known American writer, has recently experienced a small revival, but the existing body of criticism lacks true substance and scholarship. Her works need to be reexamined, and this paper seeks to do so through the lens of gender and identity. The heroines in Dawn Powell's novels, "Turn, Magic Wheel" and "A Time to be Born", construct their identities performatively in order to gain agency and maneuverability in the male-dominated society in which they live. Gender is a performance according to sociologists, West and Zimmerman, and literary theorist, Judith Butler, and the performances the heroines enact resist the gender-related constraints society places on women. Dawn Powell and her characters are also products of the Village, which was steeped in revolution, feminism, bohemianism, and identity construction. Even though Powell distances herself from the feminist movement, feminist issues surface in the constructions of her female characters and in her own life in regard to the rejection of traditional roles for women, economic independence, and sexual freedom. Effie Callingham, the primary heroine, in "Turn, Magic Wheel", undergoes a series of performances, seen over a period of roughly twenty years, and fends off the hegemonic efforts of the men in her life, namely Dennis Orphen and Andrew Callingham. Amanda Keeler Evans, in "A Time to Be Born", sculpts herself as the figure she wishes to be, which is a talented writer and public figure. She uses feminine wiles and manipulation to get ahead, but she does so consciously and with the understanding of the limited nature of the tools her disposal. Finally, Vicky Haven, also in "A Time to Be Born", turns the Cinderella tale on its head by consciously constructing herself with her own needs in consideration rather than being a passive recipient and used by others.
Turn, Magic Wheel rivals her best work, A Time to Be Born, for its cynical view of love. There are words that cannot be borne, suggestions so burning with anguish and despair that no heart can endure them, so Effie, her lover stolen, her dream of a son now stolen, got to her feet and motioning, speechless, that she was leaving, found her way out of the intolerable room. I'd still suggest that anyone who has yet to read any Dawn Powell novels begin with A Time to Be Born, which is a lock for the next Klaw 100, a wicked satire that functions more completely as a novel with real narrative greed and a protagonist you can actually support (even if she's not completely innocent herself).