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THE CULTURAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE SEMANTICS OF APPARELS IN LITERATURE: A CRITICAL STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Apparel can be considered an object of sociological and historical research since it is drawn out of a mass of a society independent of the individual whereas dressing implies the personal mode with which the wearer adopts the dress that is proposed to them by their social group. We are likely to come across a kind of coincidence between dress and dressing. There is always a kind of ambiguity as to how an item of clothing evolves and eventually changes and this confusion makes the plotting of a history of clothing rather difficult. The dress which cannot be reduced to its protective or ornamental function is a privileged semiotic field. The signifying function of dress makes it a social object. The elements of fashion are also seen as applied to the world of fiction as well as its movie adaptations. The peculiarities of a character's inner self and the strong ties it has with the development of the plot make the attire of a character vital in terms of the unsaid facts about the characters as well as their lives. Linking a character and the plot with the way he/she carries himself/herself makes the act of reading more interesting. In this paper, a critical study is made on the processes and images that apparels provide for the characters in a literary work, based on the linguistic model proposed by Roland Barthes.

Keywords: Semiotics, Culture, Fiction, Apparel Industry, Fashion

1. INTRODUCTION

The history of clothing has always brought to the forefront the aristocratic fashion. This act creates a kind of 'image' of the privileged class that would bring about a division in the society where the working middle-class people have no right to represent themselves. When we try to bring about a relation between clothing and history, these 'images' would suppress the values that is necessary for the structure of the system of clothing. There has always been difficulty in treating dress as a system since it is not an easy task to follow the evolution of a structure through time. This difficulty has been encountered by linguistics. Language, like dress, is both a system and a history giving importance to both the individual and the community. "Language and dress are, at any moment in history, complete structures, constituted organically by a functional network of norms and forms; and the transformation or displacement of any one element can modify the whole, producing a new structure" (Barthes 8). When we enter into the field of linguistics, Saussure brings in a methodology that allows him to establish a coherent object for linguistics in the distinction between langue and parole. This distinction can be applied even to the world of clothing. Barthes in his The Language of Fashion explains the components that make up language according to Saussure and also brings in its analogy to clothing as follows:

Langue is the social institution, independent of the individual; it is a normative reserve from which the individual draws their parole, a virtual system that is actualized only in and through parole. Parole is the individual act, 'an actualized manifestation of the function of language', language being a generic term for both langue and parole. It seems

to be extremely useful, by way of an analogy to clothing, to identify an institutional, fundamentally social, reality, which, independent of the individual, is like the systematic, normative reserve from which the individual draws their clothing, and which in correspondence to Saussure's langue, we propose to call a dress. And then to distinguish this from a second, individual reality, the very act of 'getting dressed', in which the individual actualizes on their body the general inscription of dress, and which, corresponding to Saussure's parole, we will call dressing. Dress and dressing form then a generic whole, for which we propose to retain the word clothing which corresponds to Saussure's language (8).

Based on the observations on signs made by Ignace Meyerson, we can distinguish for dress between indexical objects and signifying or notifying ones. "The index operates outside of any intention of directed behaviour" (Barthes 11). Barthes further claims that:

We find more reliable indexical objects in studies by a certain number of Anglo-Saxon writers, where dress is treated as the index of certain interiority. This research has taken two directions. It has been properly psychological (in the United States), in the sense of a psychology of choices and motivations, in which attempts have been made to identify the hierarchy of motives in vestimentary choices, with the aid of questionnaires and even tests. The second direction in this research on the psychology of dress takes inspiration from psychoanalysis (12).

In our life, we come across a multitude of people from various walks of life. The first aspect that we note about a person we meet is his attire because it can convey a lot about one's character. We can make first impressions about his values, and priorities that may either be right or wrong. In the world of fiction too, the authors try to position a character in the reader's mind first and foremost through the depiction of their dress. A reader often wishes to place the literary characters according to their attire which might have stroked the reader at some part of the work. Beginning with one of the literary legends, Charles Dickens, one never forgets the character of Miss Havisham in Great Expectations. Havisham who was abandoned by her fiancé on their wedding day becomes completely distraught that she wears her wedding dress every day hoping that her beloved will return to her one day. We see that with each adaptation of Great Expectations, Miss Havisham's image is recognisable, her costume a focal point, whether updated to fit a contemporary context or restyled about the body of the actress playing the role. It is designed in such a way that it functions semiotically to convey to the audience Miss Havisham's situation, that is, the life of an ageing woman who is trapped in and fixated on the past.

For a film director intended on conjuring the past, the confusion surrounding Miss Havisham and her place in history makes for an uncanny and flexible signifier of the Victorian. On the screen and in costume she constantly changes shape, she deceives and mystifies as the past is made to speak to the present and the present reinvents the past. This vividness that we come across in so many screen Havishams owes much to the way her image is presented in Dickens's novel. His descriptions of the ageing woman in her decaying wedding gown indicate his extraordinary evocative visualization of her lone world.

Great Expectations can be considered unusual in its denial of a key wedding scene as screen adaptations often centre on the gothic potential of Miss Havisham who is the most sinister and spectacular bride in Victorian fiction. The importance of her costuming lies in the fact that it must suggest, disrupt and exceed all of the usual associations of a wedding gown. Indeed the Havisham costumes do not function primarily as clothing, instead, they work as statements. Otto Thieme in his article The Art of Dress in the Victorian and Edwardian Eras argues that " dress is a visible symbol of nonvisible cultural meanings"(15), yet we notice that Miss Havisham's wedding dress distorts all of the cultural meanings surrounding the bride, especially those linked to the notions of hope, renewal and fertility.

Miss Havisham's fame is a result of her uniqueness as brides are not typically represented as grey-haired and corpse-like, forever inhabiting and exhibiting their bridal conditions. Her wedding gown instead of being preserved carefully within the hidden recesses of the Satis house is permanently on display, similar to an art installation that speaks of and in the present. We could trace a biography of her wedding dress through the novel as well as its various adaptations on screen. Dickens's most famous fictional costumes originate in Pip's description of his first encounter with Miss Havisham, emphasizing the conventional features of the bride:

She was dressed in rich material- satins, lace, silks- all of white. Her shoes were white. She had a long white veil dependent on her hair, and she had bridal flowers in her hair, but her hair was white. Some bright jewels sparkled on her neck and on her hands, and some other jewels lay sparkling on the table. Dresses, less splendid than the dress she wore, and half-packed trunks, were scattered about (Dickens 57).

Miss Havisham herself seem to direct the strange gothic story of her trauma and her wedding dress is central to her self-display. Later in the novel, Pip notes that "corpse-like" Miss Havisham has "frillings and trimmings of her bridal dress, looking like earthy paper" (Dickens 60). This unusual juxtaposition of the bridal and the deathly, which hints towards the textual is a reminder that even in his earliest writings, Dickens's imaginary linked clothing and death, where the clothes he depicts seem at times more active, more alive than their human authors. One of the most important factors regarding Miss Havisham's costume is that it is out of fashion. Havisham attempts to arrest time but behind her back, the inevitable movement of decay continues. Moulding and falling into pieces, the textiles and objects that fill Satis House are continually transforming thus revealing the irresistible nature of time and change and the futility of Miss Havisham's desire to preserve her past. To regain her past she seeks to place her outside of time and the primary signifier of this longing is her constant wearing of her wedding dress. For Ulrich Lehmann, fashion and modernity are inextricably linked. In his Tigersprung: Fashion and Modernity he says, both require "the past as (re)source and point of reference, only to plunder and transform it with an insatiable appetite for advance" (9). The character of Miss Havisham unravels this synthesis of old and new, permanent and transient. Wynne makes a note of it in her work Women and Personal Property in the Victorian Novel as she writes "She denies the new formations of a vital and evolving present by clothing herself perpetually in the styles of the past" (42). Here we see that Miss Havisham whose mind is always rooted in the past, denies everything new to her and even refuses to be a dedicated follower of the vagaries of fashion and thus resist modernity.

Another instance of the influence of clothing is seen in Margaret Mitchell's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel Gone with the Wind published in 1936. The novel written during the Great Depression, is set around the American Civil War and describes the time before, during and after the war from a Southern perspective through the protagonist Scarlett O'Hara. The novel is seen as a reflection of its turbulent era and it is one of the reasons that paved the way to its success. Gordon Hutner notes that "Historical romances, like […] Gone with the Wind reflects fears at their very core" (125). He also quotes Henry Canby who argues that Miss Margaret Mitchell's book[…] responds to the fear in every sensitive heart for the future of another culture also threatened by reconstruction"(125). These fears, and changes generated by the instability of the Depression are present in the novel on many levels and one of the main tools used in the novel to address these changes, fears and instability caused by the Civil War and consequently by the Great Depression is clothing.

One of the main concepts concerning women's identity in Gone with the Wind is the concept of what it means to be a lady. The construction of Scarlett's character through clothing starts at the very beginning of the novel as she is described as sitting on the porch with two young men:

Seated with Stuart and Brent Tarleton in the cool shade of the porch of Tara, that bright April afternoon of 1861 she made a pretty picture. Her new green flowered muslin dress spread its twelve yards of billowing material over her hoops and exactly matched the flat-heeled green Morocco slippers her father had recently brought her from Atlanta. The dress set off to perfection the seventeen-inch waist, the smallest in three counties, and the tightly fitting basque showed breasts well matured for her sixteen years. But for all the modesty of her spreading skirts, the demureness of hair netted smoothly in a chignon and the quietness of small white hands folded in her lap, her true self was poorly concealed (5).

Scarlett's goal is to be seen as what in the novel is called a lady and she uses clothing throughout the novel to achieve this goal. She repeatedly chooses clothing to create this image that she has learned from her mother and other women in her society. As the novel claims, Scarlett only knows the outward signs of being a lady and the way she sets out to be seen as one is through clothing. Clothing, apart from being functioning as protection from the elements of nature, works in the novel as protection from psychological dangers as well. According to J.C. Flügel's The Psychology of Clothes, clothing can be used as a "means of protection against moral danger" (74). According to Flügel, plain clothing may serve as protection against moral harm. In the novel this can be seen for instance in the difference between the clothing of so-called respectable ladies and prostitutes when Scarlett describes the clothing of Belle Watling when she first sees her: "Scarlett's eye was caught by a figure on the sidewalk in a brightly coloured dress- to bight for streetwear- covered by a Paisley shawl with fringes to the heels" (Mitchell147).

Scarlett considers Belle's clothing "too bright for street wear which may suggest that she considers the clothing inappropriate for herself or for any women in her social class. Flügel introduces another psychological protection that clothing can offer when he mentions that clothing can function as protection from "the general unfriendliness of the world as a whole" (77). This can be seen in Gone with the Wind as well, as Scarlett after helping Melanie give birth sits out on the porch and loosens her buttons and lifts her skirt up to cool herself in the hot weather. Instinctively upon hearing the soldiers approach she covers herself. Here, clothing functions as protection from the "unfriendly world" and

the soldiers who represent the war is a possible threat to her. The psychological protection that clothing may offer can be something more than a simple covering. The green velvet dress that Scarlett makes out of her mother's old velvet curtains has a protecting quality that soothes Scarlett emotionally as is reflected in the novel:

She closed the window leaned her head against the velvet curtains and looked out across the bleak pasture toward the dark cedars of the burying ground. The moss-green velvet curtains felt prickly and soft beneath her cheek and she rubbed her face against them gratefully, like a cat (531).

The style of the dress is fashionable and is "new" in comparison to the dresses of other society women in Atlanta, where Scarlett is to travel. The "newness" of the dress separates Scarlett from the other women whose clothing is a constant reminder of the war and it also frees Scarlett from her miserable conditions. The material of this dress comes from Tara, Scarlett's home, which she thinks is the safest place of all by wearing the soft velvet cloth she has the memory of her mother and a piece from her home near to her which when combined brings in a sense of safety. All these elements together form a group of signifiers that can be read as signifying a safe place and a shield against the misery of after-war life.

After the First World War, there was a new relation between women's bodies and their dress which brought about a drastic change in female fashion. Their body was freed from the restrictions of the corset and was more visible. Modernist writers like Virginia Woolf and Jean Rhys have explored the influence of dress on the consciousness of their characters. For Rhys's, women, the modernist idea of multiple selves is the promise of evasion from fixity and of emotional well-being and self-esteem which pretty clothes stand for. The hope of changing their selves is constantly broken and renewed. The fact that pretty clothes are strictly intertwined in sexually dependent relationships denies the emancipatory power expected from the new attributes introduced into garments by the second decade of the 20th century.

In All Right, I'll Do Anything for Good Clothes: Jean Rhys and Fashion, Joannou stresses that her fashion "vocabulary in […] fiction is expansive" (470). In one extract from Voyage in the Dark, Rhys's concern with fashion can be seen at work. Anna Morgan, a young Creole chorus girl, starts a relationship with an older and wealthy man working in the City, Walter Jeffries, who patronizes her by criticizing her clothes and giving her the money to buy new ones. On their first date, he is disturbed by her look and he asks "Do you always wear black? […] I remember you were wearing a black dress when I saw you before" (Rhys 17). She often says that she would have preferred to be black-"being black is warm and gay, being white is cold and sad" (Rhys 27). He stresses her inferiority in her fashion sense by describing her "awfully pathetic when […] choosing those horrible stockings so anxiously" (Rhys 20); his clothes too are hostile as Anna feels "the sharp points of his collar against the hand" (Rhys 20). Once she returns to her rented room she muses about her clothes:

When I thought about my clothes I was too sad to cry. About clothes, it's awful. Everything makes you want pretty clothes like hell. People laugh at girls badly dressed. Jaw, jaw, jaw[…] As if it isn't enough that you want to be beautiful, that you want to have pretty clothes, that you want it like hell…But no, it's jaw, jaw and sneer, sneer all the time. And the shop windows sneering and smiling in your face. And then you look at the skirt of your costume, all crumpled at the back. And your hideous underclothes and you think, 'Alright, I'll do anything for good clothes. Anything - anything for clothes (22).

The wearing of good clothes provides physical and emotional derision and their absence is equated with feelings of self-reproach, inadequacy and humiliation. Anna's perception of her "crumpled", and "hideous" clothes and her social situation as debasing, is heightened by her vulnerability after Walter's seduction and his sharp words on her dress and stockings make her do anything for change. She believes that the commodification of the body can compensate for the displacement and alienation providing her with the money to spend without any restraint on fashionable, "good clothes" which are invested with the power to give birth to a new self. Anna, after receiving five-pound notes to spend on some stockings, goes to Cohen's in Shaftesbury Avenue.

All the time I was dressing I was thinking about what clothes I would buy. I didn't think of anything else at all, and I forgot feeling ill[…]My voice sounded round and full instead of small and thin[…]A dress and a hat and shoes and underclothes…This is a beginning. Out of this warm room that smells of fur I'll go to all the lovely places I've ever dreamt of. This is the beginning (24-25)

The idealized clothes she intends to buy already give her a sense of shift from a "small and thin" identity that is troubled by exile and feelings of inferiority concerning her race, gender and social status to a "round and full"

accomplished self. The italicized lines of her thoughts mark the fantasized future purchases as "new performative possibilities for sensual self-expression" (Joannou 464). While trying on the clothes displayed in the window, Anna's perceptions show how the materialized garment registers on her consciousness differently from the idealized one:

I held my arms up and the thin one [one of the Cohen sisters] put on the dress as if I were a doll. The skirt was long and tight so that when I moved in it I saw the shape of my thighs […] my face in the glass looked small and frightened. The dress and coat cost eight guineas. Then the other sister came in with a dark blue and white velvet cap. That cost two guineas […] I went across the road and bought shoes. And then I brought underclothes and silk stockings. Then I had seven pounds left. I began to feel ill again. When I breathed my side hurt (25).

The dress clinging to her body reveals her thighs and again seen as "small and frightened" as before fantasizing about it. The clothes that Anna idealized could not become more than "an imaginary ideal" (Joannou 474). As soon as they become part of her reality, coming into contact with her body, and materialize her dependence on Walter's money, they turn from "a signifier of transformation into a signifier of corrosive ennui or despair" which makes her ill (Joannou 476). Here, the interpersonal function of clothes establishes a relationship of inferiority and subjection between Anna and Walter based on an exchange of sexual services for fashionable garments and on the disparity of class and race. In their stylistic function, clothes contribute to conveying a surrealistic effect of derangement, for which characters are objectified through the looking glasses, masks and costumes.

Anna's alienation leads her to perceive objects and people as having a threatening attitude towards her while she is debased by associations to inanimate objects like dolls flowers and animals. Subversion of animate and inanimate objects and references to masks causes a defamiliarizing effect but as Joannou states "a mask is not merely a shield that conceals the truth; a mask sometimes expresses that very truth" (477). Anna's memory of the West Indies involves a Carnival Masquerade where black people attired in bright coloured costumes take a parade, their "arms covered with white powder" and wearing white masks through which they stick out their tongues mocking their white colonisers (Rhys 156-7). Anna who always desired to be black, in her memory shifts the pronoun "them" to "we", asserting in her consciousness her true self through a double mask, that is, a creole acquiring an attired black identity, in a special and temporal disjunction from her present.

These examples from the literature show us how important is the function of a character's clothing in providing us with intimate knowledge about a character as well as the general characteristics of the period in which a work of art is set reinforcing a strong background for its plot construction. When the reader finds a novel or a character to be his favourite one, either because of the uniqueness of the character or because of the character's likeness to the reader, creates a desire inside the reader's mind to have something about that novel or character that he could hold dear to other than possessing the work as such. In the past, the only thing that the reader could do was to write down his favourite phrases or quotes so that he could go through them later. Today, as times and technology change, a reader has to no longer write it down as he has the opportunity to wear T-shirts and other items of clothing that carry printed phrases and quotes from famous literary texts. The textile industry has made literature so popular that a huge population across the globe has been transformed into a literary-conscious mass who are ready to accept new ideas that could help create a better future for all by spreading awareness to their fellow beings through whatever possible means available to them.

Roland Barthes who had been very much influenced by the linguistic theories of Saussure, tried applying the principles of his theories to mediums other than language. In his The Language of Fashion, Barthes borrows Saussure's concepts of language and parole and transfers this distinction to clothing by separating 'dress' and 'dressing'. Dress is the system of shared meaning invoked by clothing along with the rules governing the allowed combinations, while dressing is the actual act of putting on and wearing specific material items of clothing. Here, we see dress and dressing affecting each other in what Barthes calls a 'dialectical exchange' (The Language of Fashion 9). Tracing the histories of dressing and dress one notes that while everyone is affected by the rules of dress, their acts of dressing gradually tend to affect these rules. Barthes's early writings were more concerned with the overall framework of clothing along with history and communication in clothing. In his later essays like 'Blue is in Fashion this Year', 'From Gemstone to Jewellery' and 'Dandyism and Fashion', he gradually moves away from material clothing and focuses instead on what he calls written clothing or written fashion. This eventually led him to pen The Fashion System and to analyse the language of fashion magazines in France. His purpose was to derive the linguistic system that fashion utterances are organized within since he believed that fashion is constructed through this inscription of fashion meaning. Thus, for Barthes clothing becomes fashion when it is written and material clothing exists independent of fashion.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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