

Did Apparel (Eighteen-eighties- Nineteen-twenties) Help American Women's Emancipation? A Socio-Literary Problematic Response

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Fashion historian Aileen Ribeiro maintains that “clothing is simultaneously personal ... and ‘the mirror of history,’” as Louis XIV had first declared (*Art of Dress* 3). Clothes and accessories are indeed signifiers of the historical and cultural codes of their times. They are literally the “stuff” of life. I will analyze some of the most paradigmatic changes in women's clothes and accessories in the years between the eighteen-eighties and the nineteen-twenties because, insofar as it was related to the sexual politics of Western cultures, fashion was “an integral part of the social, intellectual, and aesthetic ferment of the *fin de siècle*” (Steele, “*Femme Fatale*” 316) and, also, of the beginning of the twentieth century. My aim is to show if and how, either urged by organized struggles for the rights of women or anticipated by sensitive *couturiers* with an eye to epochal innovations, such changes *emancipated* American women from the vestimentary *shackles* with which fashion had previously *enslaved* them. It is not surprising that the vocabulary generally employed on the subject by fashion historians is the same as that of abolitionism, since it is from this crucible that the suffragist movement emerged—even if full recognition of the “woman question” came only after the Civil War (Gilbert 93-114), as did most changes in female attire.

According to several fashion scholars and sociologists, through a combination of necessity and choice, the new attire helped women fight for social status, creative fulfillment and, therefore, a new place in society: in other words,

these changes allowed them to be “self-reliant,” as Emerson had preached every human being should be. In my opinion, however, such exultant assertions stand in need of, at least, some qualification. First of all, even within such a relatively short span of time—from the eighteen-eighties, when the paradigm of woman as frail (physically, mentally, and morally) still meant that she needed to be protected by the safe walls of the house and indeed be the “angel in the house,” to the nineteen-twenties, when she was theoretically accepted as equal to man in all sectors of society and, after the approval of the nineteenth amendment, was finally permitted to vote—there were set-backs in the way clothes and accessories were fashioned: since fashion history is not linear—even though, due to repetitions and doublings back, it is relational—, changes in clothing “came in oddly overlapping impulses” (Joslin 148). For instance, during this period, corsets kept going in and out of fashion: was this because, according to the male ideal of female erotic beauty, they “improved” on woman’s body shape? (Steele, “The Corset” 449-73). And if this is the case, when did emancipation *really* begin?

Secondly, hygiene, comfort, and mobility—the proclaimed musts of female clothing—were not the only criteria according to which female attire was designed and accepted. In particular—Anne Hollander maintains—comfort is often “a mental rather than a physical condition,” as “it is the image of comfort that is desirable, the look of wearing something sanctioned by the fashionable ideal of comfort” (*Seeing* 339, 348). Thirdly, before some radical, structural vestimentary changes were taken into serious consideration, for at least three decades (from the eighteen-eighties to World War I) only a minority of women—mostly from the middle and upper middle classes, those who till then had been the arbiters of fashion—had the audacity to wear garments that allowed them to move with ease and feel free. Finally, it must be taken into account that while some of the social advances made by women were institutionally very important, others were transient and illusionary (and, in everyday living, perhaps, still waiting to be fully realized), for women had not really been able to convert their voting power into sustained political power. If it is true that, after World War I and in the nineteen-twenties, a new way of thinking and acting, a totally new “fashion” of conceiving clothes and accessories for women was brought about by the modernist impulse to break away from tradition and prioritize the individual over social norms, it is also true that, in those same years, some sections of society were still very traditional and in the labor market women were often compelled to settle for underpaid and sex-segregated jobs (Dumenil 98-144). Therefore, although this period was, in many ways, an exciting one for women, it must be evaluated with caution.

I will focus attention, as intimated, not only on clothes, but also on accessories. Far from dismissing them as superfluous, I consider them as ornaments that give *access* to a personality, particularly at a time when the position of women was largely cast as, indeed, ornamental.

It should be immediately pointed out that the relevance of apparel is complex. Operating “on the boundary between self and other,” clothes and accessories are

what Joanne Entwistle defines as “an intimate experience of the body and a public presentation of it”; they are “one of the means by which bodies are . . . given meaning and identity.” Better still, they are “an embodied activity . . . embedded within social relations” (274-76). Since clothing articulates the relationship between the body and its milieu and affects the way people “see themselves . . . feel about and communicate with others” (Hughes, *Henry James* 185), in her seminal text, “The Dress of Women,” Charlotte Perkins Gilman convincingly argued that “cloth is a social tissue” (20).

Clothes and accessories, however, can also be used to conceal identities, that is, to play with identity to create disconcerting effects, because appearances can be manipulated through apparel to produce inauthentic resonances. Clothing can thus contribute to a confusion of identity or even a usurpation of identity. Dressing may, in fact, also entail dressing up. It has been pointed out that “You can lie in the language of dress” (Lurie 24). Furthermore, in so far as clothes have much to do with class and money and often function as indices of desire, they are, in Claire Hughes’ view, “a dream of alterity, of what one wants to be” (*Henry James* 113), but one is not or is not yet. Finally, one must also be aware that clothing is not only a means to connect, to conceal, or to give the reins to the imagination, but it also sets the body apart from the social world. As Elizabeth Wilson puts it, “Dress is the frontier between the self and the not-self” (*Adorned* 3)—a frontier that is, at times, impenetrable. Clothing can thus turn out to be the body’s shield, even its armor, thanks to which people defend themselves or close themselves off from the world.

If, according to Hollander, “Western dress requires the body to give clothes meaning” (*Seeing* 337), especially in the past garments imposed themselves on the female body: they quite literally fashioned the physical form of woman, and in so doing they set themselves forward “as the visual manifestation of her femininity.” But if “the woman . . . is revealed . . . through the garment that shapes and articulates her” (Bancroft 74), the garment could not but impinge upon her subjectivity, and, in particular, upon her sexual expression.

Changes in female apparel stood for changes in the ways women’s bodies (and personalities) were looked at and evaluated as social signs. In particular—Martha Banta has argued— “[t]he way a woman dresses and looks may be the means by which she displays her ideas to the world, as well as revealing her complex affiliation with the very society she wishes to alter” (78-81).

In my observations on some canonical texts that mostly refer to the American middle or upper classes—the only ones for whom, especially at the end of the nineteenth century, at a time of conspicuous consumption and waste, garments were a matter of choice—I will comment on how some authors registered and reacted to certain items in women’s apparel: entirely or only partly emancipatory. One must keep in mind, however, that authors often ostensibly treat their characters’ dress, that is, “their historically determined or specific and stylistically presented way of looking,” as “irrelevant” (Hollander, *Seeing* 421). Nonethe-

less, behind such a “universalist” attitude, even when apparently unobtrusive, synecdochical and meaningful details may be lurking.

There is a distance that must be accounted for between the visual and the verbal. What happens when textile becomes text? Hughes has pertinently asked, “What do words do for dress?” (“Dressing” 11). A tentative answer may be found in the question that an iconic figure like Diane Vreeland (fashion editor of *Harper’s Bazaar* and of *Vogue* and consultant to the Costume Institute at the Metropolitan Museum of Art) once posed, “Where would fashion *be* without literature?” (82); I take the emphasis on “be” to mean that, contrary to its intrinsically temporary life, fashion achieves permanent status thanks to literature.

Honoré de Balzac was the first Western writer to openly assert and demonstrate that clothes and accessories are the most powerful of symbols. He went so far as to draw a sort of physiology of appearances. Thomas Carlyle, in his 1836 social satire, *Sartor Resartus*, had already understood the significance of clothes when he affirmed that they not only are the man, but replace him. Much more recently, Quentin Bell is even more explicit when he proclaims that clothing is “a natural extension of the body, or even of the soul” (19). According to Wilson, dress in literature (the “written” dress) is “a cultural metaphor for the body; it is the material with which we write or draw a representation of the body into a cultural context” (“Fashion” 6). If, as Henry James maintained, in a narrative every touch must count—and, knowing him, one would want to specify, both morally and aesthetically—it seems that one must give presentations of clothes and accessories their due weight. They, in fact, serve several functions: they contribute to the reality effect, they assert or hint at the nature of class and gender relations, they may communicate intentions, and they may at least provide, as has been minimalistically proposed, “insights into culture, allowing a momentary articulation of meaning” (Oliver 11). As James, again, cautiously put it—and he was too much of an admirer of Balzac¹ not to draw this lesson from him—clothing may be regarded as a “seen” from which “to guess the unseen,” from which to “trace the implication of things” (“Art of Fiction” 53). This “implication,” however, must be delicately assessed since it must be unraveled from descriptions or, most often, from flashing presentations of clothes and accessories conveying fragments of diverse associations. Not only, but, following Roland Barthes, for whom clothing functions “simultaneously as [the body’s] substitute and its mask,” we may agree with him that, when presented in literature, thanks to the rhetorical connotations lent by language, clothing turns into a “spectacle” (236). If what an author stages for readers through apparel is a “spectacle,” such a spectacle stands in need of being interpreted, that is, of being unraveled by “feeling the inner echo of visual memory and unconscious fantasy” (Hollander, *Feeding* 106). Clothes and accessories, especially in literary texts, may thus be elusive because they are polyvalent: dress, in Alison Lurie’s view, is both a performance and a metaphorical language.

¹ James dedicated four essays to Balzac (1875, 1877, 1902, 1905).



1 Bell body shape.

In the nineteenth century, various utopian communalists, both religious and secular, as well as some health reformers considered trousers or pantaloons the proper dress for women. But it was only at the Seneca Falls Women's Rights Convention in 1848 that women not only invoked the right to vote but also that of wearing clothing that, besides being ornamental, should be conducive to their health, comfort and utility. Such clothing had to be the opposite of what, in use in those years, fashioned the so called bell-body shape, thanks to its tightly corseted busts—harmful to lungs, abdomen, and spine—and to the many layers of petticoats—often up to a weight of 17 lbs. Above all, the new clothing would have to allow for the articulation of the leg, a part of a woman's body that conventional morality forbade even to mention. Promoted, if not invented, by Amelia Bloomer, the new attire (called "bloomers") consisted of loose trousers gathered at the ankles, like those worn by Turkish women—thus conveying, in spite of their inventor's declared intention, an exotically voluptuous touch. They were often topped by an ample shirt and a short skirt hanging over them. Even if the intention was to combine utility and beauty, bloomers were ridiculed by the press and were not widely adopted even by suffragists. In the eighteen-eighties, for the comfort of New Women, bloomers were superseded by the divided skirt



2 Bloomers.

generally worn under a long jacket. They were proposed by Lady Harberton in England at the founding of the Rational Dress Society. She proclaimed that as long as woman was recognized as a biped, she was entitled to garments that would give freedom to all her limbs. The Rational Dress Society also campaigned against high-heeled and narrow-toed women's shoes. During the Gilded Age, at the end of the eighteen-eighties and in the eighteen-nineties, thanks to an impetuous sports craze for women—cycling, hockey, archery, golf—the divided skirt was replaced by the knickerbocker suit, with baggy-kneed trousers worn with stockings. It must be stressed that safety bicycles—and the knickerbockers worn to ride them—changed “the conventions of courtship and chaperonage, of marriage and travel” (Marks 174): they provided transportation and entertainment and encouraged exercise and good health (Marks 201). Addressing women, feminist Mary E. Ward wrote that by bicycling they would “become alert, active, quick-sighted, and keenly alive as well to the rights of others as to what is due [to themselves]” (13). At a time when women started being admitted to a University education, physical and mental exertions—that had been previously believed to detract from womanly functions—validated each other. This notwithstanding, society at large was afraid that women's muscles and intellectual careers would entail a gender trans-



3 Divided skirt.

ference: because women hold the physiological key to the next generation, they were feared to emasculate men and bring about a different era.

In 1895 Kate Chopin published a short-story, “The Unexpected,” in which cycling helps the protagonist, Dorothea, move beyond convention, while affirming her physicality. Engaged to Randall, who has become very ill, Dorothea, after a mad ride on her bicycle alone in the countryside, decides not to marry him thus going against society’s rules and her relatives’ presumable psychological pressures. If the new vehicle helps her make up her mind and assert herself, the writer, who evidently did not want to portray her protagonist as a rebel, does not specify what kind of riding costume she is wearing, even though she states that it covered her “toes.” Did Chopin intend to instill suspicion in the minds of trusting parents and fiancées that even in conventional dress young women might now dare proclaim their autonomy? Quite different is the case that she proposed five years later, in 1900, when she wrote the long short-story “Charlie.” Its protagonist is a seventeen-year-old girl—the second of seven sisters—much loved by her widowed father (a Louisiana plantation owner), to whom she is deeply devoted. Rather than playing the piano, dancing, and painting, as befits the *cursus honorum* of the women of her social class, Charlie likes to go fishing, shooting, riding,



4 Knickerbockers.

and indeed cycling. Not by chance her nickname is epicene and her given name, Charlotte, derives from Karl, whose German root means “man.” Consequently, Charlie is an androgynous woman, a (grown up) tom-boy: accordingly, she bursts into the setting of the story mounting her black horse and immediately afterwards readers are informed that a new bicycle has just arrived for her. While her dark hair is unconventionally cut short, she wears “a costume of her own devising, something between bloomers and a divided skirt which she called her trouserlets” (639). As she lives in the countryside and is not up-to-date fashion-wise, her clothing combines the two previous costumes for active women (and not the by then well-known knickerbockers). The name she finds for her outfit bespeaks her linguistic inventiveness (later on readers will learn that she even writes poems). This garment’s cut is its most significant characteristic, since, contrary to the information we are given about the dresses of her older and younger sisters, we know neither its color nor its fabric. The mention of the “divided skirt,” while obliquely referring to the female sex, points to the structural discontinuity and hybrid nature of this costume, indeed to its intrinsic “in-between”-ness (Giorcelli, “Gender” 229-59). When Charlie becomes infatuated with a young man, Firman, in the vain attempt to attract him she doubles the frills and furbelows on

her newly-bought feminine dresses to the point of becoming grotesque: adopting a language of dress that she does not know, she turns into the caricature of what a young lady should look like. She even combs her short hair with curling irons, making her head look now like “a prize chrysanthemum” (657). But, when she finds out that Firman has proposed to her very lady-like elder sister, Julia, Charlie puts on her “trouserlets” again. The return to her former garment could be seen as a sign of regression if, at the same time, she had not matured into the “mistress” (669) of her father’s plantation. Because he had lost his right arm in a mill accident, she will run the property in a garment that underlines her double role. As she takes care of both her father and her five younger sisters, in fact, she also carries out the recognized feminine functions: those of nurse and (vicarious) mother. No longer the uncouth tomboy and no longer the ridiculous female, she commands respect in a costume that simultaneously presents both genders with neither predominating. Differently from *Little Women’s* Jo March—whom in many ways she resembles—Charlie will defer to an indefinite time marriage to the young, but elderly looking, suitor who loves her as she is. Charlie may indeed be the precursor of the woman Gilman would invoke fifteen years later: that is, someone who would “strike out for oneself, . . . cultivate an original distinctive personal taste . . . invent for oneself . . . choose a special personal style and hold to it.” (“Dress” 331). Given its unconventionality, it will not come as a surprise that this short story was not published until 1964.

It was also in the eighteen-nineties that the Gibson girl type became fashionable: both fragile and voluptuous, tall and slender, with narrow-waist, but large bust and hips, she was the counter-New Woman in that she did not question traditional feminine roles. For day-wear she adopted a long skirt and a tight shirt, worn with a corset, and combed her abundant hair high in a chignon with a waterfall of curls and waves. Her hair, indeed, became the benchmark of her style. In spite of her tight lacing, she was portrayed as athletic, independent, seeking personal fulfillment, and even flirtatious, so as to be a captivating and contradictory figure that stood mid-way between the traditional and the progressive woman, both undermining and sanctioning women’s desires for social progress.

Edith Wharton had the economic ease to buy and wear expensive and always up-to-date clothes. She was so interested in clothing that not only did she visit textile factories, but, during World War I, she even managed a sewing-room for working-class refugee women in Paris.² Wharton’s sense of elegance and inner insecurity were such that she hoped—in vain—to attract Henry James’s attention through her apparel at their first two meetings: the first time she wore a “newest Doucet dress” and the second time she donned “a beautiful new hat” (*Backward* 172). As, at a time of exuberance in adornments, her aesthetics praised

² In her first story (published in 1916, but written in 1892), “The Bunner Sisters,” Wharton’s protagonists are two seamstresses.

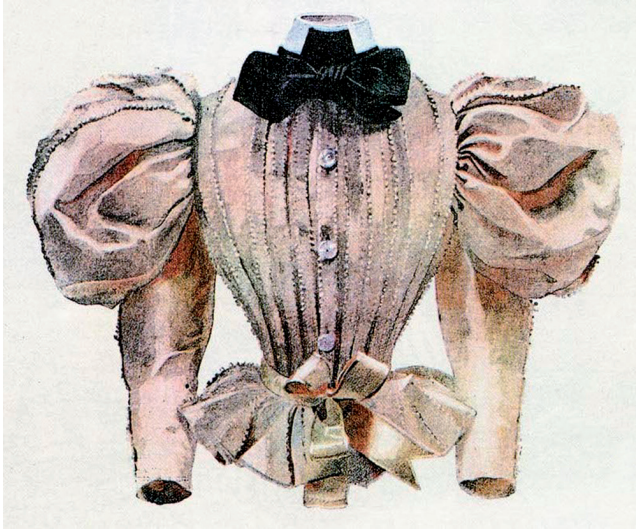


5 The Gibson girl.

“moderation, fitness, and relevance,”³ the narrator of one of her stories, “Madame de Treymes” (1907), significantly insists on singleness, when he states that elegance can be detected in “the very fall of a flounce and tilt of a feather” (18; italics mine). Even though Wharton objected to the Gibson girl’s conflicting message,⁴ for one of her early short stories, “The Touchstone” (1900), she must have had her in mind when she portrayed the character of Alexa, the woman loved by the protagonist, who appreciates “the deep roll of hair that overhung her brow like the eaves of a temple” (210). In order to be able to marry her, he sells the letters sent to him by a great woman writer, who had been in love with him. Being traditional in his tastes, he could not love this artist because she was physically plain and did not know how to dress: “Her dress never seemed a part of her; all her clothes had an impersonal air, as though they had belonged to someone else and been borrowed in an emergency” (170). Such a pitiless verdict ends with this final stroke, “Genius is of small use to a woman who does not know how to do her hair” (170). The conventionally beautiful Alexa (who *does* know), however, is capable of rescuing the protagonist from the deep sense of guilt in which he is engulfed, thus proving that she is not only attractive, but, although she overtly eschews feminist statements, is also intelligent and forgiving. If she is not a New Woman, like the Gibson girl she is, at least, a new version of “the angel in the house.”

³ These are the three principles that Edith Wharton (with Ogden Codman) considers as milestones of taste in *The Decoration of Houses*, 198.

⁴ For the serialized *House of Mirth* in *Scribner’s Magazine* (1905), Wharton disliked the fact that its illustrator, A. B. Wenzell, drew Lily according to the conventions of the Gibson girl.



6 Leg-of-mutton sleeves.

From the eighteen-eighties to the first decade of the twentieth century, at the other end of the spectrum lay the great majority of women: how did they dress? Succinctly: when bustles and trains went out of fashion at the end of the eighteen-seventies and then again in the middle of the eighteen-eighties, in the late eighteen-eighties and in the eighteen-nineties the so called hour-glass or S-shape figure came into fashion with dresses worn over tight, elongated corsets. Specifically, in the eighteen-nineties, women's clothes featured a tight bodice and enormous leg-of-mutton sleeves, so closely fitted to the lower arms as to impede movement. In the nineteen-hundreds women's clothes, with their sinuous lines, serpentine sweeps, soft hues, and ravishing effects, were characterized by a taste for ornamentation, rich materials, and elaborate draperies. At the same time, however, soberer tailored clothes and sailor hats, worn for outdoor activities and traveling, became the latest novelty; they featured, as a sign of important innovation, ankle-length skirts and, often, neckties. Although not as radical as trousers, the tailored suit, with its masculine associations and austerity, was an emblem, however feeble, of the New Woman.

In 1900, when *Sister Carrie* appeared, Theodore Dreiser—who would later become editor of a women's magazine, *The Delineator*—showed that he already knew much about female apparel. Whereas the beginning of the story is pushed back to 1889, from its outset Dreiser dresses his protagonist, who “longed for dress and beauty with a whole heart” (25) and who had a sure “instinct in the matter of dress” (60), in accordance with the fashion of the time of the book's publication. In *Carrie*, a sort of *femme fatale* is portrayed—one who leads men to their ruin, also owing to the alluring power of clothes. We see her rise from poverty to fame through her progressively more expensive and *à la page* changes of garments. When Carrie goes out to work on her first job in Chicago she dons



7 Sailor hat.

a poor apparel, “a worn shirt-waist of dotted blue percale, a skirt of light-brown serge rather faded, and a small straw hat . . . Her shoes were old, and her necktie was in that crumpled, flattened state which time and much wearing impart” (37). After becoming Drouet’s kept woman, however, when she clandestinely meets Hurstwood in Jefferson Park, she wears a similar, but now smart outfit: “She had just recently donned a sailor hat for the season with a band of pretty white-dotted blue silk. Her skirt was of a rich blue material, and her shirt waist matched it, with a thin stripe of blue upon a snow-white ground—stripes that were as fine as hairs” (162). This is a sporty apparel worn by a woman who is neither practicing a sport nor traveling: Carrie simply pretends (she will become an actress) to be one who does in order to look up-to-date. It must be remembered that at the end of the century both the bourgeois dictates about *what* should be worn *where* and the boundaries between *le monde* and *le demi-monde*—inhabited by courtesans and, indeed, actresses—had been called into question. In addition, consumerism was being catered to by department stores which were beginning to provide cheaper facsimiles of fashionable clothes and displaying them so as to inculcate desire (Brown 31). In Walter Benjamin’s famous observation—“the sex appeal of the inorganic”—a sexual exploitation of commodities was taking place in these temples of consumerism, because “Fashion prescribes the ritual according to which the fetish commodity demands to be worshipped” (18). Dreiser shows through



8 Hats (1900-10).

Carrie how clothes are a means to move up the social ladder in the anonymity of the big city, which itself is synonymous with modernity and novelty. Carrie follows all the prescribed fashion rules: for instance, as if she were a lady, she would never go out without a hat, to the point that, when she is still very poor, she buys a new one even though what she really needs are a jacket and shoes to face the rigors of winter in Chicago. When she finally reaches New York, she learns a lot by looking at stylish women in Broadway and by listening to the “dashing” Mrs. Vance’s advice, “The next time you get a pair of shoes, dearie, . . . get button, with thick soles and patent-leather tips” (347). In the emerging consumer culture, such fashion fetishes as shoes (Carrie’s first job had been in a shoe company) are recurrent in Dreiser’s narrative. Unhampered by moral scruples, Carrie might have been daring in her apparel, but, since she is not aiming to make a social statement, but, literally, to climb up the social ladder, she ends up by dressing like the Fashionable Woman as opposed to the New Woman.

Both in the eighteen-nineties and in the nineteen-hundreds, for formal wear, fashion dictated huge, broad-brimmed hats, trimmed with masses of feathers—and, occasionally, life-size stuffed birds—decorated with ribbons, long pins, and artificial flowers, thus sporting an extraordinary fusion of the artificial

and the natural.⁵ Gilman was so incensed by her dislike of these hats that she wrote, “There is today no stronger argument against the claim of Humanness in women, of Human Dignity and Human Rights than this visible and all-too-convincing evidence of subhuman foolishness” (“Dress” 161).

Henry James set the time of his short story “Crapy Cornelia” (published in 1910) in 1898, that is, thirty years after an episode that the narrative twice indicates as taking place in 1868. It is an episode that gives the story its point. For our purposes, what these two dates (1898 and 1868) have in common is the style of women’s hats that, at both times, sported feathers and other trimmings, but with a definite difference: those of the late eighteen-nineties were, as just affirmed, much more ornate. They were, in fact, to all intents and purposes excessive or, to use a word that appears twice in the story with reference to the coeval clothes and furniture, quite “rococo” (822, 833). One must remember that James was also an art critic and, therefore, paid great attention to visual details. The protagonist of this story, Cornelia, is “crapy” (crape wool was then worn by widows as a sign of mourning) because she wears “a sparsely feathered black hat” (825), a “frumpy, crapy, curiously exotic hat” (827-28) that is “quite unlike those the women . . . were now ‘wearing’” (825). This hat is so important that the title of the short story refers to it via Cornelia who is designated by it. It is probably a Tyrolean (since it is “exotic”) peaked crown hat. Although at the beginning of the story Cornelia is nothing more than “a dingy little presence” (823), “a poor thing” (826), and “a poor dear” (836), as the narrative progresses she is credited as possessing “the pitch of history, the pitch of acquired and earned suggestion, the pitch of association” (821): that is, she embodies what the “distinguished” bachelor narrator is looking for. He is weary of “the world about him, a world of constant breathless renewals and merciless substitutions” (822)—very much like the world of fashion, one would be tempted to add. Cornelia (who lives in a house named “The Gainsborough,” to underline the flamboyant hats in style both at the end of the eighteenth and at the end of the nineteenth centuries) stands out against the contemporary new rich of New York to the point that the narrator finally decides not to propose to the young, beautiful, wealthy and seductive widow, Mrs. Worthingham—whose dresses and ornaments possess a “scenic extravagance” with “their curves, and convolutions, and other flourishes” (822)—, but, instead, opts for cherishing the companionship of the plain, but stylish Cornelia. James would seem to be passing a negative judgment on women’s fashion of the late eighteen-nineties, if it were not that the narrator, nostalgic as he is of a previous time and of previous ways of being, is portrayed as much “refined and trimmed” (819), even sepulchral, in his White-Mason surname. He thus perfectly matches the mourning entailed in the crepe worn by Cornelia.

⁵ With the new century, the new sport for women of means was car-driving; to protect them from dust, fashion prescribed enormous, unpractical hats wrapped up in veils.



9 Paul Poiret's gown.

In her *Utopia, Herland* (1915), Gilman describes its female inhabitants as hatless, with short hair, and wearing a comfortable garment made of a tunic and breeches, similar to the “Chinese dress” (216). For practical reasons (practicality being one of Gilman’s staples), this garment features many pockets. Apart from these, if the style of hair and the type of dress were in line with Gilman’s nationalistic re-evaluation of American sobriety (Scacchi 122-27), they were contrary to her hostility toward foreign models (Giorcelli, “The Power” 37): in effect, both the hair style and the dress of her utopian women had *already* been proposed in France by Paul Poiret, who in 1904 had created his revolutionary “Confucius” coat (a vertical top-to-toe sweep of lacquer-red silk) and cut his models’ hair short for his 1908 collection. After the success of the *Ballets Russes* in Paris in 1909, when a wave of Orientalism ensued, for his wealthy patrons Poiret even more enthusiastically embraced Chinese- and Japanese-looking dresses in strong colors (also in accordance with the colors used by *Les Fauves* in their 1905 exhibition) eschewing corsets and petticoats altogether. With these innovations Poiret initiated a no-going-back revolution. Yet he may also have been inspired by another, less revolutionary, but still subtly innovative, fashion trend that in those years tended to liberate women from clothing strictures: the revival of the mid-eighteen-



10 Tea-Gown.

seventies tea-gowns, that had, incidentally, also been influenced by Asian clothing. Tea-gowns did not usually have a defined waistline and favored simplicity of line. To counterbalance such an unstructured and untrimmed style, they were made of gorgeous fabrics that only middle- and upper-class women could afford. Notwithstanding the fact that tea-gowns could be seen as “a new type of seductive dishabille” (Steele, “*Femme Fatale*” 321) and, therefore, considered “as a sign of indolence and degeneracy” (Ribeiro, *Dress* 148), it was thanks to them that underwear came to acquire extraordinary success and the idea of seductiveness began to lurk behind discourses about femininity, even when applied to “virtuous” women as opposed to a *femme fatale* like Proust’s *Odette*, for instance.

As mentioned before, however, the great divide came with World War I: the absence of fathers, brothers, sons, and husbands from the domestic scene reversed the traditional gender roles: women had to work outside their homes, for private or public necessities. After the war—even though many women were thrown out of their jobs when the men came back to resume theirs—their style of dress never returned to its previous characteristics: hems were cut to the knees, waistlines disappeared, clothes were loose-fitting, cloche hats without brims became fashionable, and corsets were substituted by girdles and brassieres. But, if

truth be told, what rendered corsets obsolete was probably the change in women's physical ideal of themselves: their slimness and androgyny was made possible less by constrictive underwear than by diet and exercise. It was especially the bobbed hair, the *coupe à la garçonne*, however, that became a symbol of female independence and freedom. Released from the previous heavy and voluminous hairdos—"that had been a sort of metaphor for the structures of bourgeois life" (Zdatny 378)—women chose a style of hair that was much less cumbersome, albeit not so practical as commonly believed, as it required constant trimming at the beauty parlor. The bob was certainly more youthful-looking: youth having become the new myth of Western societies. A picture of the new ethos and fashion is to be found in an article, "Eulogy on the Flapper," written by Zelda Fitzgerald—an icon of the times:

The Flapper awoke from her lethargy of sub-deb-ism, bobbed her hair, put on her choicest pair of earrings and a great deal of audacity and rouge and went into the battle. She flirted because it was fun to flit, . . . she refused to be bored because she wasn't boring. She was conscious that the things she did were the things she had always wanted to do. (38)

The tone of this article clearly illustrates the individual pleasure in the description of apparel and behavior as acts of defiance, but also as a means of self-creation. Sociologist René König stated that in those years the shape of women's dresses and their hair style were so wide-spread as to become "democratic" (40): women from different social classes joined in. The nineteen-twenties, in fact, changed the context in which fashion was consumed: fashionable attire was no longer the province of conspicuous elites. The stress on vibrant physicality included also "an emphasis on sexual attractiveness" (Dumenil 134): even if promiscuity was not condoned, a "variety of sexual activities short of intercourse" were (Dumenil 136). Gloria Gilbert, in Fitzgerald's *The Beautiful and Damned* (1922), is a representative of such young women. At the novel's outset, the narrative time is pushed back to the year before the beginning of World War I, but the fashion of the garments Gloria displays is that of the nineteen-twenties—the luscious, supple, charming nineteen-twenties. In particular, with her "boyish and slim" figure (307), Gloria wears laces and furs in abundance—fur coats and trimmings being the great hit of those years, as these few instances show: "Under her fur coat her dress was Alice-blue, with white lace crinkled stiffly about her throat" (53); "Her fur trimmed suit was grey" (57); "She was in a shop now . . . moving lithely among the velvets and the furs" (94); she also dons "a new brown dress edged with fur" (235). When she becomes poor she longs for a "grey squirrel coat" (310). The last time we see her through the eyes of the "pretty girl in yellow" on the deck of the liner that will take her and Anthony to Europe, she wears "a Russian sable coat" (368). Fur,⁶ with its softness, warmth, luster, and, especially, its animal deriva-

6 According to Freud, fur has the capacity to turn into a fetish as it recalls pubic hair (Sigmund Freud, "Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality" [1903]).



11 Clothes of the nineteen-twenties.

tion, hints at the cruelty embodied by Gloria, whom Anthony sees as a predator, or, in Keats' words, as a *'belle dame sans merci.'* Victorious in the law-suit that turns the impoverished and desperate couple into millionaires again, fur stands for the cold-blooded drive that, with her invalid husband, Gloria's future will probably take.

In 1928, when *Quicksand* came out, the roaring twenties and the excitements of the Harlem Renaissance were about to end, engulfed by the Great Depression. Nella Larsen must have sensed this when she chose such a disquieting title for her first novel, centered on a very thought-provoking protagonist. Larsen was well aware of the time's stylish items when, in the first scene, she portrays her mulatto protagonist, the young, beautiful, cultivated, single Helga Crane, in the intimacy of her room, in elegant *dishabille*: a "vivid green and gold negligée and glistening brocaded mules" (2). Helga, a teacher at a Southern College for African American students, possesses a "rare and intensely personal taste" (1) and buys expensive clothes: "Most of her earnings had gone into clothes" (6). The narrative stresses all along that Helga wears beautiful "things" for the simple reason that she likes them and delights in them. While the black bourgeoisie that administers the College, afraid of having its women judged as sexually approach-



12 Fur trimmings of the nineteen-twenties.

able, prescribes sober clothes in dark colors, Helga likes to don “dark purples, royal blues, rich greens, deep reds,” that is, bright (but not gaudy) colors, in “soft, luxurious woolens, or heavy, clinging silks . . . Old laces, strange embroideries, dim brocades” (18), that is, in precious (but not showy) fabrics. Nevertheless, her superiors do not appreciate such subtleties. Considered a means of attracting attention to the body, in fact, up to the end of the nineteenth century, a penchant for bright colors in clothes was a euphemism for prostitution (Aindow). In the nineteen-twenties, however, fashionable colors were often bright and the most up-to-date fabrics were chiffon, taffeta, silk, velvet, and brocade. In addition, besides the custom-jewelry copiously introduced by Coco Chanel, clothes were trimmed with feathers, flowers, and, as with Fitzgerald’s Gloria, furs and laces. Helga is thus dressed as fashion demands, even if not according to the Black bourgeoisie’s social code. To the point that her “small plain hats” are considered by her superiors as “positively indecent” (18), adopting a vocabulary usually employed to condemn immoral behavior. Only once, after leaving her College, when she looks for a job in Chicago, she wears what they would have recommended: “She dressed . . . in the plainest garments she possessed, a suit of fine blue twill faultlessly tailored, from whose left pocket peeped a gay kerchief, an unadorned,

heavy silk blouse, a small, smart, fawn-colored hat, and slim, brown oxfords" (31). The "gay" kerchief is the only item that departs from the rigid rules laid down by her superiors. When Helga moves to New York, initially she seems to agree with her upper middle-class friend Anne's ideas about the necessity for blacks to keep themselves to themselves, but, in time, she finds that Anne is hypocritical for she apes the clothes, manners, and ways of living of the whites. Helga then decides to leave New York and go to Copenhagen, to her Danish maternal relatives. Just before taking off, however, she goes dancing in Harlem, purposely wearing an outfit which she herself judges as "too *décolleté* and too *outré*": a "cobwebby black net touched with orange" (56). The net fabric and the low cut bodice, combined with black—traditionally the color of sin—, bespeak her defiance of black bourgeois precepts, while reflecting, as usual, what was perfectly in fashion. In Copenhagen, where she goes to find stability, she ends up by being appalled by the garments bought for her by her relatives. Dressed, in her own opinion, like "a veritable savage" (with long earrings, big bracelets, shining buckles, vivid colors, turban-hats, feathers, furs, strange jewelry and even "a nauseous Eastern perfume" [74]), she feels like "a decoration," "a curio," "a peacock" (73). Turned into an exotic/erotic object to be admired because "different"—a sort of Josephine Baker, unwillingly exhibited—she chooses to go back to New York. Here, after having been humiliated when she had finally resolved to no longer repress her erotic feelings, one night she enters a Baptist church wearing a red dress that, drenched with rain, clings to her body. For the third time in the narrative, here, on account of both her red dress and of her walking the streets alone, she is mistaken for a prostitute. In her final move Helga goes South, to a poor community in Alabama, having married the minister of the New York Baptist church. After four pregnancies, the last of which had almost killed her, we see her for the second time in *dishabille*: but not, as at the beginning, in elegant attire, but in a "flimsy *crêpe*" nightgown that is "a relic of pre-matrimonial days" (129). This underwear makes her an object of desire for her husband whom by now she hates. If in the nineteen-twenties, as mentioned above, unassailably respectable white women could don attractive underwear without stirring moralistic reactions, a *black woman* (a double shortcoming in Larsen's understanding and representation) could not, because—and this is one of the novel's messages—both white prejudices and, as W. E. B. Dubois had pointed out, blacks' double-vision about themselves would turn the meaning of such items upside down: fashion and elegance in black women were seen by whites and blacks alike as devices for hustling. If in Foucault's and Marcuse's view, the nineteen-twenties were a time of new subjugation for women since consumerism—the antithesis of freedom—turned shopping into another sort of enslavement, it is doubly ironical that Helga is enslaved by her desire for beauty. All those who surround her do not consider the beautiful clothes she buys and wears as a means for her self-expression and self-enhancement; on the contrary, they condemn and damn her on account of her clothing which is seen by them as a *vanitas vanitatum*, in its most sanctimonious sense.

What kind of emancipation through garments, then, really *did* take place for American women from the eighteen-eighties to the nineteen-twenties? The response is indeed problematic.

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- 8 Women's picture hats from 1911, Nordiska Museet, Stockholm.
- 9 Paul Poiret, evening dress, 1913, Fashion Institute of Technology, © The Museum at FIT, New York.
- 10 Tea-Gown, designed by Redfern, photograph in *Les Modes: Revue mensuelle illustrée des arts décoratifs appliqués à la femme*. Feb. 1902. Cliché by Léopold-Émile Reutlinger.
- 11 Fashion advertisement from *McCall's Magazine-L'Echo de Paris*, circa 1928.
- 12 *Hedda Hopper of the films*, New York, 31 Oct. 1929, photo by Bain News Service, Library of Congress, Washington.

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- 1 Woman's plaid silk tafetta dress, France, circa 1855, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles.
- 2 The bloomer costume, lithograph, New York: Currier, 1851, Library of Congress, Washington.
- 3 *The start*, American Stereoscopic Company, circa 1897, photographic print on stereo card, Library of Congress, Washington.
- 4 Portrait of Alice Manfield, between circa 1900 and circa 1930. Written on image lower left: "Guide Alice, Mt. Buffalo." State Library of Victoria, Melbourne.
- 5 Engraving after Charles Dana Gibson's original drawing *America Picturesque: Scenes Anywhere along the Coast*, circa 1900, detail.
- 6 Advertisement by Charvet and Gelot, *Herald Tribune*, 1896, detail.
- 7 Dorothy Campbell wearing a straw sailor, 1909, *The American Golfer* 3.1 (1909).