

Spring 5-2018

You Are What You Wear: Clothing and American Authors of the Early 20th Century

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ABSTRACT

Though clothes are often said to “make the man,” they are not frequently said to build a character. This thesis explores the ways in which clothing was a performative tool for those who wore it during the 1920s in America as well as for authors who wrote about this world in which they lived. This study’s theoretical framework is inspired by Judith Butler’s concept of the performative; it is also influenced by historical research into the clothing of the 1920s. Primary texts explored include F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* and *Tender Is the Night*, Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand*, and Jessie Redmon Fauset’s *Plum Bun: A Novel without a Moral*. In each of these works, clothing is used symbolically as a way to emphasize thematic elements, but it is also used as a tool through which the author builds characters. Through careful crafting of the self’s appearance, individuals choose to either conform to the world around them or to subvert it. Furthermore, these characters use clothing to specific purposes, mirroring the utility of garments in the real world, whether one is examining contemporary society or a specific era like the Jazz Age.

You Are What You Wear:
Clothing and American Authors of the Early 20th Century

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Graduate School

Abilene Christian University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

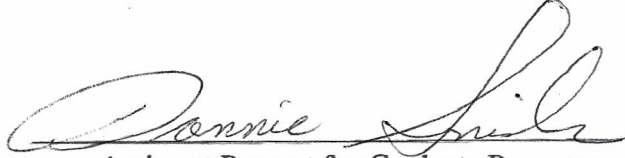
by

Alyssa Quinn Johnson

May 2018

This thesis, directed and approved by the candidate's committee, has been accepted by the Graduate Council of Abilene Christian University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

Master of Arts

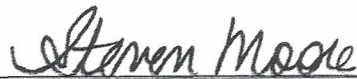


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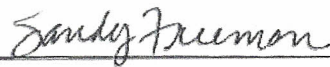
Thesis Committee



Dr. Steven Moore, Chair



Dr. Cole Bennett



Professor Sandy Freeman

To Steven Moore and Kylo Ren, because I said I would.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Rather than taking the time to list each of the ACU Language and Literature professors individually, suffice it to say that each of them has played a huge role in my development as a scholar and as a kinder, more thoughtful human being. Thank you all for being the best part of what ACU has to offer.

Special thanks to my committee. To Sandy Freeman, for sharing her passion for costuming with me. To Cole Bennett, for the answers to my endless questions, your neverending willingness to help me with problems both school-related and completely irrelevant, and the cat pictures. To Steven Moore, for constant encouragement throughout this project, patience, and “Highways / Byways.”

Finally, thanks to my family and friends for their support, senses of humor, and willingness to listen every time I say, “Fun fact!” For your generous ears and your generous hearts, I am truly thankful.

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CHAPTER I

THREADING THE NEEDLE:

INTRODUCTION AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The 1920s provide a rich cultural setting that is highly appealing to filmmakers. Movies such as *Chicago*, *The Artist*, *The King's Speech*, the television series *Downton Abbey*, and the many iterations of *The Great Gatsby* demonstrate interpretations of the zeitgeist of the period as well as the rich availability of interesting visual rhetoric. Visually, much of the period has come to be represented through costuming. Great changes were happening societally as well as sartorially, changes that reflect and shape each other. After the first World War, the world experienced a paradigm shift that was helped along by changes in fashions. Dress in the 1920s, the focus of this thesis, exemplifies these global changes.

Clothing has a clear and direct relationship to the culture it adorns; therefore, the actual garments a given culture wore are less important than the reasons they wore them. Not only is costume a cultural mirror, but it also serves a rhetorical purpose, particularly when utilized in literary works. Through history and literature, we can note evidence of important cultural changes that happened between WWI and the beginning of the Great Depression. During this era, American culture experienced great economic changes as well as shifting gender politics; these changes are visible both in garments from the period and in sartorial descriptions of characters in Jazz Age literature. Fashion is an indication of what a culture believed was flattering, appealing, beautiful, and powerful; in

this thesis, I seek to clarify these elements for American Modernists, including both expatriates and Harlem Renaissance authors. As Elizabeth Wilson writes, “we wear inscribed upon our bodies the often obscure relationship of art, personal psychology and the social order” (Qtd. in Harris 74). That which we place upon the body is an important expression of artistry (or lack thereof); furthermore, garments are powerful rhetorical tools. Because “clothes are both public and personal,” they can lead to insights about the wearer as well as the culture at hand (Kaiser 3). Additionally, clothing is a means through which wearers frequently rebel against the status quo. A good deal of the changes in fashion during the early 1900s were driven by the desire to rebel against the strict fashion codes of earlier decades.

Clothing, regardless of the wearer’s intent, is always coded with meaning. Therefore, interpreting clothing as a text leads us to various rhetorical insights, particularly when we examine a specific period and theoretical lens. Judith Butler argues that gender is performative and constructed through various “stylized repetitions of acts.” Clothing frequently serves a function of construction and distinguishing genders; as a performative mask, it wields great power. However, its power is stronger than merely that of gender differentiation. Butler’s thesis inspires me to examine other ways in which clothing as a performative tool can shape perceptions of the wearer, for example, demonstrating or creating the illusion of class distinction. Clothing is performative in various ways, exemplified in garments from the 1920s as well as the works of F. Scott Fitzgerald, Nella Larsen, and Jessie Redmon Fauset. While other theses and dissertations have explored similar topics, none I have found examines the period as a comprehensive whole. Additionally, none I have found compares and contrasts the contemporary worlds

of the Harlem Renaissance and the expatriate, often more well-known authors. I want to bring various ideas about these texts into conversation under the idea that clothing is performative, both in Judith Butler's sense regarding gender, but also with consideration to social class distinctions as well as individual rhetorical teloses and identities. It is important that we understand the ways in which clothing continues to "perform" roles for us because they constitute an integral part of identity. In many ways, just as characters become what they wear, we become the garments we choose to put on.

Understanding Costume and Dress

Before examining the context this thesis will focus on, it is helpful to remember the purposes of clothing. Dress is considered by Michael and Arianne Batterberry to serve three primary functions: protection, decoration, and to arouse the emotions of sex and fear. Additionally, every society has exhibited dressing for the sole purpose of decoration. In fact, Batterberry and Batterberry use the metaphor of an envelope that conceals and holds the body for clothing. They cite a study by Dr. Leo Spiegel in *The Journal of Genetic Psychology* whose experiment showed that when children were asked to describe a beautiful woman, most "responded in terms of clothing and hair," leading Dr. Spiegel to determine that "[t]he emphasis on the envelope of the body is so overwhelming one has the impression that children consider beauty something one puts on and takes off with clothes and cosmetics, and not an inherently intrinsic part of the body" (10). Beauty is not something that comes from the flesh alone; historically humans know things are beautiful when they are dressed accordingly. As beauty is constructed by its context, clothing plays an integral role in crafting any given society's definitions of beauty. Pauline Weston Thomas notes that fashion is both a sign system and a

“barometer of change.” Clothing creates a language that enables individuals to communicate non-verbally, helping “us to make ourselves understood with rapid comprehension by the onlooker” (Thomas). Various perspectives are used in the study of clothing, but a contextual perspective, “considering the actual social situations, as well as the larger cultural or historical context,” is what Susan Kaiser, author of *The Social Psychology of Clothing*, touts as the best way to examine fashion (58). The materials, including clothing, from a given cultural context have “historical meanings” attached, meanings that “represent a more general context influencing how people relate to one another” (Kaiser 30).

In addition to creating beauty and aesthetic pleasure, clothing has “social implications” because garments “socially organiz[e] our understanding of the differences between males and females, including the extent to which these differences are socially and artificially imposed” (Kaiser 13). Not only do they categorize and help construct gender (clothes could be considered a part of Butler’s stylized, repeated acts), but they also construct socioeconomic status and power structures, among other labels. These labels help us to “simplify and make sense of social interactions” (Kaiser 34). The wearing of a garment helps us to fit in with a group and feel better about ourselves. Clothing in a novel or story frequently enables characters to increase self-esteem and, more importantly, perform roles that enable them to belong.

Beauty is, in large part, a consequence and a construct of these meanings. This understanding is predicated by acknowledging that “[h]umans create their own realities, in part, by managing their appearances” (Kaiser 41). The world is shaped heavily by the symbols people create and wear on their bodies. The creations our bodies present to the

world influence their actions toward us because we, according to Kaiser, “act toward other people, in part, on the basis of the meanings their appearances hold for us” (42). The world and people in it can be manipulated through visual presentations, particularly those of well-crafted images of people. The influence of clothing can be strong, particularly when a person is trying to persuade another through the visual rhetoric of their physical appearance. Clothing, when considered as a sign and a symbol, has great power in various realms, including “[e]xercising authority, wielding power, differentiating the sexes, and arousing sexual interest,” according to Ruth Rubinstein, author of *Dress Codes: Meanings and Messages in American Culture* (8).

Clothing has the power to arouse strong emotions; primarily, it is used to attract sexual partners and create an impression of power or fear. Standards of modesty naturally come to mind when we consider clothing in the context of seduction; however, Batterberry and Batterberry claim that “sexual attraction, rather than repulsion, has long served as one of the major purposes of clothing as decoration” (11). In fact, many historians believe that after time periods of population reductions (for instance, after the Black Death), décolletages drop and pants grow tighter; people tend to wear sexier clothing as if in response to the societal need for reproduction. Therefore, as we note changing standards of modesty in the early 1900s, it is important to remember that “shame and a sense of modesty are emotions that are not necessarily associated with bodily nudity at all. ... Moreover, the notion of the location of the ‘shameful’ part of the body varies from society to society and generation to generation” (Batterberry and Batterberry 11). Both the idea of modesty and the idea of shame are, therefore,

“acquired” (Batterberry and Batterberry 11). This reminds us that clothing helps construct and is constructed by its own society.

According to Cunnington and Cunnington, these standards of modesty have worked primarily for sexual attraction, particularly for women. They posit that the main two influences on fashion are “class distinction and sex attraction, the former mainly responsible for men’s fashion, the latter for women” (Cunnington and Cunnington 18). Women tend to use clothing as a means of sexual attraction, whereas men use garments to create an image of power. When the relationship of clothing to society is considered, wearers can have one or more personal motives: “to validate personal identity,” “to protect the personal self,” “to portray a wished-for identity,” or “to proclaim one’s personal values” (Rubinstein 246). The masks clothing creates allow wearers to achieve certain goals; dress is, therefore, a rhetorical choice. Notably, “there is no fashion in a hierarchical society where the boundaries between social classes are tightly shut and there is no possibility for mobility” (Rubinstein 149). Historically, the aristocracy maintained “visual superiority” by creating new fashions “as soon as their existing style was adopted by members of the middle class” (Rubinstein 149). One of the inherent functions of clothing as a symbol is to assert one’s class; in a society without flexible class distinctions such as the United States, clothing enables wearers to transform themselves into members of a higher class by putting on the right garments.

Beliefs, particularly those about gender and socioeconomic roles, are influenced and shaped by clothing, largely because these “beliefs and values tend to be perpetuated when they are represented on a relatively unconscious level” (Kaiser 51). This is especially noteworthy when we consider gender relations. Though clothing is obviously

omnipresent, the messages a wearer's garments send frequently go unnoticed; this is why elements of dress frequently hold signals and signification we understand without thinking about them. Clothing is highly gendered (particularly historically); this is one of its primary functions. However, the degree to which clothing is gendered is cultural and dependent upon context and the wearer because people have "the potential to transform their own realities by manipulating the objects in their cultural worlds" (Kaiser 51). Clothing, rather than being a passive element of daily life, holds great rhetorical power because wearers of clothing can "transform their realities through the means they develop to see the world" (Kaiser 52).

Differentiation of sexes is achieved through clothing in every culture, and it is important to examine some of the elements of this differentiation. Again, we go back to the Cunnington's observation: men tend to dress for class distinction while women tend to dress for sexual attraction. Psychologist J.C. Flugel observes in his "shifting erogenous zones" theory that "the purposes of fashion is to create sexual interest"; and, therefore, the entire "phenomenon of fashion entails the shifting of focus from one part of the female anatomy to another" (qtd. in Rubinstein 14). By contrast, male dress focuses on the "values of a political authority," and when "impatience with established political authority develops to the extent that a new group with different values gains power, the pattern of discourse is altered" along with "the basic style of male dress" (Rubinstein 31). Flugel's hypothesis, corroborated by C. Willett and Phyllis Cunnington, is that female dress changes predominantly to create sexual intrigue, whereas male dress changes along with power structures. Both sexes, as we will see, use clothes to rebel against social structures during the 1920s. Additionally, James Laver, costume historian, believes that

“sex-specific attire identifies the social spheres in which men and women function,” with the “hierarchy principle” underlying male dress and the “seductive principle” underlying female dress (Rubinstein 83). Rubinstein explains that this means that men “wear class-conscious attire that reflects their standing in the wider social sphere” while women’s dress is “designed to make women attractive to men and hence less significant,” linking gendered expectations for behavior tightly to appearance (Rubinstein 83). Clothing, therefore, takes part in gender distinction, but also in the objectification of women. Conspicuous displays of wealth are highly influential in the ways people choose to wear, and Thorstein Veblen (1899) realized that “in an industrialized society, women’s roles were linked to the display of their husbands’ wealth” (Kaiser 14). When we consider more than just sexual roles, it becomes clear that clothing as a marker of socioeconomic status becomes a burden on both men and women. Although clothing can send rebellious messages, it can also help to maintain the status quo.

Rhetorical messages sent through clothing are powerful. Perceptions of viewers are impacted by what a person looks like. According to research, “[a] person may be evaluated as basically good or bad on the basis of appearance,” especially if they are a woman: “Females dressed in conservative or casual styles are judged as more sincere, trustful, and reliable than those wearing dressy or ‘daring’ (more sexually provocative) styles,” whereas women dressed more provocatively or even women who are endowed with larger breasts “are viewed as less moral than women with small breasts” (Kaiser 265). Additionally, Kaiser notes that “[w]hether or not an observed person is seen as friendly and sociable is linked to his or her clothing,” and “popular styles of clothing appear to communicate a stronger impression of sociability” than less stylish outfits;

furthermore, when women wear “very dressy or sophisticated styles,” they tend to “elicit judgments of their being less popular, cheerful, and sociable than those women wearing conservative, casual, or provocative styles” (Kaiser 265). Kaiser suggests that this “dressy appearance may connote excessive concern about appearance and lack of self-confidence on the part of a wearer” (265). Another study compared judgments of revealing and nonrevealing attire, and the results suggested that “those who wore nonrevealing attire were judged as more likable, kind, and warm. . . . It seems that women wearing revealing attire are perceived as sexually attractive and desirable, but not necessarily nice” (Kaiser 265). By conforming to social expectations and standards, wearers reap benefits; Rubinstein explains the “wearing of attire . . . suggests the achievement of cultural values, what a society considers good and desirable, leads to a positive social evaluation and response” (125). These studies bolster what people have instinctively known for years: By dressing in a certain way, a person can manipulate observers opinions as well as actions. Whether this takes shape in form of a police uniform, a court judge’s robe, or a white wedding dress, clothing bears meaning that is always interpreted by viewers.

On a smaller scale, “[i]ndividuals dress in part on the basis of their interpretations of audiences’ expectations in order to anticipate approval from others” (Kaiser 196). Instead of being artificial, Kaiser argues that “appearance management characterizes some of the rituals and feelings that make us social creatures . . . in general, dressing for the eyes of others is not necessarily distinct from dressing for the self” (Kaiser 199-200). Dress is also a means of self-identification. We define ourselves as we put on and take off clothing, particularly in the way we “identify ourselves as members of our society by

assuming its ‘costume’” (Batterberry and Batterberry 10). Dressing in a certain way also has the power to situate the wearer in a certain tier of a specific society, but it also allows us to decorate our bodies for individual expression. Generally speaking, this self-expression occurs in informal attire, along with the obtaining of personal goals, “rather than with a more enduring, formalized economic transaction” (Rubinstein 41). Notably, these goals and ends experienced quite a shift during the twentieth century, particularly in a global atmosphere influenced by the war.

A Changing World

World War I changed the world permanently, and the changes are visible in a “change of dress” that many attribute to the war itself; however, Batterberry and Batterberry argue that many elements of the Victorian period were already dying in a vast “reaction to the suppression of the spirit inflicted by Victorian attitudes” (264). Victorian repression, both in attitudes and in garments, “rendered the rebellion of women all the more vehement,” increasing their love for cosmetics and horrifying older generations; many women even began to adopt male “vices” such as smoking (Batterberry and Batterberry 265). Rebellion as well as a desire to vote influenced feminine fashion and culture heavily at this time. As Batterberry and Batterberry write, the desire for voters’ equality was “more than a disembodied concept; it took a highly physical form. Women covered their white complexions with cold cream and went out on the tennis courts. They skated, rowed, cycled in divided skirts, and took to ballooning,” some learned to drive a car, wearing “a simple skirt and shirt with jabot, a gray dustcoat..., a large hat and veil” (Batterberry and Batterberry 266). In dressing more like men, they thought they could perhaps gain rights like theirs, primarily the right to vote. This “‘new woman’ stood in

need of comfort, freedom to move, and simplicity in dress” (Batterberry and Batterberry 267).

For men, the war changed class distinction as well. This can even be seen in their undergarments, where “the symbols of social rank, except for formal occasions, were declining” (Cunnington and Cunnington 219). Whereas previously, the rank of gentleman was signified by a specific shirt and collar, in the new world an imitation collar could be bought cheaply, establishing “the reign of the soft shirt” as “the frock-coat and top hat were tottering to their doom” (Cunnington and Cunnington 219). Such elements that established status as a man of means were declining, particularly in England. In America, class distinctions were less rigid; therefore, any man could dress like a “gentleman”. This will prove to be exemplified in the figures of Jay Gatsby and Dick Diver in the works of F. Scott Fitzgerald, which we will examine in later chapters. Through clothing, they perform as members of classes they were not born into. Instead of these garments showing wealth, the “only trace of class distinction was the frequency with which it could be sent to the wash” (Cunnington and Cunnington 220). Now, clean clothes displayed a class status that could be bought by anyone, a status that was not exclusive for those born into wealth. Additionally, the Industrial Revolution led to clothing being produced outside the home, and “[b]etween 1890 and 1910 the clothing industry expanded rapidly,” leading to “fashion became more democratic and available to the general public” (Kaiser 13). Georg Simmel (1904) posited “that fashions ‘trickle down’ from the upper classes to the lower classes, with the tendency for social classes to imitate those immediately above them in order to move up the social ladder” (Kaiser 14). All of these factors lead us to realize that clothing has great power to construct realities as well as

perceptions of others; it is performative on a vast number of stages. As demonstrated, clothing categorizes and shapes the society we live in, most frequently when we consider it in light of gender roles, socioeconomic status, and individual rhetorical choices and purposes. The latter is highly significant when we begin to consider ways in which editorial choices can be used to perform essential roles in society and achieve our goals.

Theoretical Lens

In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler explains at length how our conceptualization of gender is, at large, performative. She argues that gender is not a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time – an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*. Further, gender is instituted through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self. (Butler 900)

Clothing is a means through which gender is performed, a component of this stylized repetition of acts. Butler points out ways in which this construction of gender is problematic in her essay, and although elements of the performative in clothing can be problematic (as will be demonstrated in various chapters), it is important first to note the ways in which her ideas apply to the realm of clothing. Stylized and repeated acts are exemplified hugely in costuming. Social psychologist Susan Kaiser agrees with Butler's concept that clothing is performative. However, there is little intersection between the fields of costume history, literature, and theory. Clothing is performative both in the real world as well as in a text. Costuming is an integral component of a theatre production; it

also plays an integral role in literature and life. With a deeper understanding of sartorial coding, we become better interpreters of text and of the lives around us.

Viewing costuming as an aspect of performances both on the stage and in real life is essential. Kaiser notes that “appearance management as a form of human behavior may be characterized in part by performance of the self in context” (Kaiser 190). Elizabeth Wilson, who wrote *Adorned in Dreams*, believes fashion is itself “a kind of performance art, with clothes acting as a poster announcing our act” in addition to our “occupation, marital or social status” (qtd. in Harris 77). Many analogies drawn between human behavior and the theater are built upon the idea that the self and identity are built in a social context much like theatre productions are built in a theatrical context. John Goffman, author of *Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life*, studied the “self as a staged production or a series of masks that people present to the diverse audiences they encounter,” leading him to understand the self as the “result of interaction between actor and audience” (Kaiser 192). With a mere change of appearance, a person can assume a different identity.

Performance is affected and prescribed by social conventions, especially since “society has already provided a ‘script’ for one to follow. Being cast in a role is facilitated by ‘looking the part’ and dressing in a costume that others have come to expect of a person in that role” (Kaiser 193). Furthermore, wearers “acquire masks to adopt certain roles for performances” that shape our perceptions of the self (Kaiser 193). In fact, Kaiser notes that even the

words *person* and *personality* are derived from the Latin word *persona*, which means ‘mask.’ Our personae become our public self-presentations, which should

not necessarily be regarded as deceitful or even totally purposive. In contrast, they are likely to be so well-ingrained in everyday life actions that we take them for granted and rarely focus on them (Kaiser 193).

Like Butler's stylized repetitious acts that enforce gender, the repeated symbols and signs woven into our clothing are, for the most part, unconsciously replicated and worn.

Butler argues gender is "a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief" (Butler 901). If you dress a certain way long enough, you grow to believe that the role you put on is your identity. Kaiser notes that "many of our roles or performances do become incorporated into identities," and the roles we perform tend to have fairly strict—if unspoken—classifications for dress (Kaiser 194). This pattern establishes things we begin to take for granted. In the early 1900s, American women were breaking the patterns through which femininity had been performed in ways that brought about this "new woman" persona. Designers like Poiret and Chanel saw the need for the new woman, and their designs and success showed that women were ready for something new, something to wear that allowed them to perform acts differently; for example, they produced trousers for women, built clothes with flexibility and comfort in mind, and removed the corset as a required undergarment for women. Wearers still performed their genders through clothing and through the acts that clothing allowed them, but their performance was changed, along with their expected societal rules.

Performances enabled by clothing are not limited to the sphere of gender. Although some theorists suggest that men have a tendency throughout time to use clothing to appear more powerful to other men, whereas women use it to attract a mate,

garments have power in the world of socioeconomic status as well. Clothing allows both sexes to perform roles for the same sex, although the goals in mind in those situations tend to be different (for example, women dressing to impress other women in order to be considered more popular or part of a social group). Garments help the wearer craft whatever illusion they would like to create. Butler calls “gender identity” a “performative accomplishment” (Butler 901). Likewise, the identity crafted through a wearer’s garments is an accomplishment, which explains why humans throughout time have devoted so much time to bodily decoration. The body is a text upon which clothing writes; Butler claims it “is not merely matter but a continual and incessant *materializing* of possibilities. One is not simply a body, but, in some very key sense, one does one’s body and, indeed, one does one’s body differently from one’s contemporaries and from one’s embodied predecessors and successors as well” (Butler 902). In dressing one’s body, one creates and builds one’s body, and one does so with specific rhetorical goals and purposes in mind. Furthermore, by shaping one’s body through activities such as suntanning or exercising, the body is also coded with specific messages. It is particularly important to consider the historical context of a dressed body because “the body *is* a historical situation” as well as “a manner of doing, dramatizing, and *reproducing* a historical situation” (Butler 902).

Butler goes as far to say that “the various acts of gender create the idea of gender, and without those acts, there would be no gender at all” (Butler 903). These acts that create gender can be seen in clothing. Butler believes “the body becomes its gender through a series of acts which are renewed, revised, and consolidated through time” (903-4). Through elements of gendered dress, such as the skirt or low décolletage, bodies are

seamlessly gendered in a way we do not typically notice. Like a script, Butler believes gender is rehearsed, and clothing frequently functions as the script through which actors (and wearers) perform. Though she focuses on the ways in which gender is performed, I wish to focus on the ways in which clothing is performative and editorial, regardless of the wearer's telos. Clothing enables performances of all kinds. As Butler writes, "[t]he body is not passively scripted with cultural codes," instead, "the gendered body acts its part in a culturally restricted corporeal space and enacts interpretations within the confines of already existing directives" (Butler 906-7). Clothing frequently creates these boundaries and directives.

Gender is not passively worn; neither are clothes. As Butler writes, "[g]ender is not passively scripted on the body, and neither is it determined by nature, language, the symbolic, or the overwhelming history of patriarchy. Gender is what is put on, invariably, under constraint, daily and incessantly, with anxiety and pleasure," (Butler 910).

Likewise, clothing is put on every day, enabling the wearer to don a preferred mask that allows them to perform whatever role they wish (or, more darkly, whatever role they are forced to play). This is particularly relevant in consideration of gender roles and in matters of social status. Although a garment may merely appear to be a mask, eventually "many of our roles or performances do become incorporated into identities" (Kaiser 194). As Harris writes, "[c]lothes play an indispensable part in the production of the social self and in the creation of identity" (74).

Gender has historically been one of the primary lenses through which costuming has been viewed. It is important to the study of clothing because gender's "definition constitutes one of the most fundamental social meanings expressed and shaped by

clothes” (Kaiser 13). Gender is one of these issues. Gender is coded into our clothing through all societies (Kaiser 67). This does not mean, however, that the coding is rigid. In the midst of change, “fashion often captures the essence of the resulting tensions by bringing them to the surface” (Kaiser 68). Kaiser agrees with Butler that gender is socially constructed; she further notes that

appearance becomes a medium with which we can shape our impressions of what it means to be male or female. ... gender is a pervasive, but often hidden, theme in the social psychology of clothing. A contextual perspective leads us to consider not only differences, but also similarities in males’ and females’ experiences in and across contexts. (Kaiser 65)

From incredibly young ages, children use “clothing to classify people according to cultural codes or rules of gender, before they are likely to understand biological differences” (Kaiser 65). Garments are used throughout our lives to “classify and understand others and the self,” and these categories help us understand the world (66).

Kaiser notes that in a society that categorizes gender into a binary, “social expectations about what it means to be male or female tend to be differentiated in an oversimplified manner,” frequently with an emphasis that “females are expected to be immersed in the fashion and beauty culture, whereas males are not,” closely linking “femininity and beauty” (Kaiser 66). In contrast to this seemingly dutiful attention to beauty, men who are overly attentive to “looks or to fashion” are “often regarded with suspicion,” even though clothing is just as important a tool in their lives (Kaiser 66). Clothing is relevant not just in the designation of these “gender boundaries”; it also helps us to understand “the nature of relationships” (Kaiser 66). J. C. Flugel sees the foundation

for “sex specific attire” as the relationship between sexes; because a “visual distinction between the sexes has been seen throughout history and in most places and in most parts of the world,” sex-specific attire may be “intended to alert an approaching individual about suitability for sexual intercourse,” rendering gender distinction through clothing essential to the “[s]urvival of the species” (qtd. in Rubinstein 83). This goes back to Butler’s idea that the creation of gender has human survival as its telos. Gendered implications are integral to the survival of the human race because they ensure reproduction. Though this is somewhat problematic in Butler’s eyes, this thesis will explore the ways in which clothing performance and sartorial choices can help wearers and characters attempt to succeed, whether their goals are to break stereotypes, achieve the girl of their dreams, or get by in a world set against them.

Conclusion

Particularly in a postindustrial society where clothing was mass-producible, obtainable due to the easy spread of goods as well as a flourishing post-war American economy, and undergoing a good deal of change, the rhetoric of what was worn during the 1920s is important to examine. Not only is costume a cultural mirror, but it also serves a rhetorical purpose, particularly when utilized in literary works. Although authors use clothing differently, a comparison of clothing in F. Scott Fitzgerald’s expatriate world with the ways female Harlem Renaissance authors used clothing in the 1920s demonstrates that the underlying symbols and influences are the same. These influences can be seen in fashion from the period, which will be examined first. In light of the ways both women and men were mistreated due to lower socioeconomic status or race, it is helpful to see ways in which clothing helped them to both rebel against the status quo and

to see ways in which they were unable to successfully break the mold imposed upon them. Throughout significant American texts, authors use garments in powerful ways, and through an understanding of the ways in which dress is performative in the real world as well as on the page we can understand better the ways in which clothing was and is a powerful force on our bodies and in our minds.

CHAPTER II
MORE THAN ZOOT SUITS AND FLAPPERS:
FASHION IN THE 1920S

Through both history and literature, we can note evidence of important cultural changes between WWI and the Great Depression. During this era, American culture experienced great socioeconomic changes as well as shifting gender politics; these changes are visible both in real life and in sartorial descriptions of characters in literature. According to the Cunningtons, World War I had a huge effect on clothing; however, “these changes had already begun before 1914 and ... the war merely hastened and developed them” (219). World War I catalyzed the simplification of fashion as it continued to “reach a still larger section of the community, at least in their cheaper forms” (Cunnington and Cunnington 219). As it simplified and spread, clothing in this period became an effective rhetorical tool, allowing wearers to perform gender as well as social class and their own individual rhetorical goals. Distinctions between social class now had more to do with wealth than birth. Whereas in the old world, social class was primarily determined by family title, in the new world a person’s rank in society had the potential to be based on individual accomplishment. This had always been the case in America for certain populations, but the new, simplified ability to dress the part helped. As demonstrated in the introduction, any given culture’s clothing reveals what a culture perceives as beautiful and valuable. In this time period, the value of youth increased

exponentially. Whereas the ideal figure for a woman before the war had matronly curves, the new woman was slim, youthful, and athletic. Rubinstein believes this straight post-war silhouette “denied the traditional elements that anchor the female identity to the womanly role” in its straight figure that emphasized youth; in other words, even in the ideal silhouette we can see how youth was valuable (Rubinstein 237). Clothing allowed women in particular (but also men) to individually embrace—and perform—a more youthful persona because that was what their culture valued. While Butler says that gender is performative, I would argue, based on the introductory material above, that clothing is performative not just of gender but also of socioeconomic class and identity. History reveals that clothing of this period was particularly resourceful to display class, gender, and individual rhetorical goals due to the changes occurring in the world.

Notably, as cities in both Europe and America were “transformed from predominantly rural to urban, industrial entities, values emerged to coincide with these changes, including the Protestant work ethic, the strong desire for economic advancement, the move to industrialization and modernization, and the growth of democratic institutions”; interestingly, these “values were applied to the domain of males, rather than to females” (Kaiser 74). As class dynamics were shifting, additional shifts in American culture were occurring that impacted clothing as well as “manners and morals”; significantly, “the 1920 census found that the great majority of Americans were living in urban areas, where greater freedom from traditional ‘gatekeepers’ existed and the possibility of wearing ‘outrageous’ fashion became viable” (Rubinstein 238). The general American society was shifting “from an agrarian society to one based on manufacturing, retailing and commerce,” which affected all levels of society through “the

development of an economy that became dependent on consumerism” (Welters and Cunningham 2). With this population migration came the “shift of the economy from a capital-goods to a consumer-goods base,” and clothing became part of a true industry in America (Rubinstein 238). Just like in other art forms, “the fashionable ideal reflected the activism, dynamism, and speed of new technology—trains, planes, telegraph, and telephone,” and since fashion frequently represents the sentiments of a general culture, “the dreams, fears, and hopes” of Americans during this time are reflected in the clothing (Rubinstein 238). This consumerism, which F. Scott Fitzgerald would come to critique in many works, *The Great Gatsby* in particular, manifests itself in conspicuous displays of wealth periodically, and in this as well as other epochs, “Americans have expended much effort to display their wealth through personal appearance” (Welters and Cunningham 2).

Europe, Fashion, and Expatriatism

The historical context of Modernism is important when we consider fashion as an artistic endeavor. This movement

emerged in the early part of the twentieth century and spoke with many voices, perspectives, and materials. Fragments were juxtaposed to create works—to remake life. In the process, continuity was disrupted, and the individual subject in art became dislocated. High culture quoted popular culture. Perhaps in fashion, the ‘flapper’ style of the 1920s epitomizes the modernist movement. (Kaiser 403)

American Literary Modernism, a literary movement that was at its height as Fitzgerald, Larsen, and Fauset were writing, impacted fashion; retrospectively, it also demonstrates



Fig. 1. Green dress: Costume Institute *Metropolitan Museum of Art*.

influences of fashion on the texts. Not only did these writers wear the clothing mentioned here, but they also wrote about it. The arts flourished in Harlem in New York and in Paris with the Americans who lived and wrote abroad. Standards of fashion had typically been set in France, where many artists lived during the 1920s. However, postwar French fashion houses were faced with a lack of workers, textiles, and industries. Drastic shortages hampered an attempt to return to the way things were. The States shifted into a period of economic

excess and abundance F. Scott Fitzgerald coined the “Jazz Age,” and clothing changed significantly. Prohibition,

modernism, and media (magazines, movies, radio) all played influential roles in the evolution of style. The strong American economy in the aftermath of WWI led to changes in American fashion and in American attitude. This is noteworthy because fashion always reflects the culture that creates it. Women beginning to dress more similarly to men provides evidence of the attempt to claim some of the power and rights men had. Additionally, artistic elements of fashion began to fragment in manner similar to other artistic elements. Softness was no longer the goal; instead, harsh lines and interesting patterns grew more popular. The harsh stripe in the dress in Figure 1 is an example of the different lines; it is also an example of a dropped waist in which the

female waistline was no longer at the natural waist or higher; instead, it is lowered to the hips, creating a more boyish silhouette. Paris became a haven for artists who wanted to inexpensively indulge in a decadent lifestyle while they created and searched for artistic inspiration.

Fashion ties into modernism, particularly in Paris. According to Batterberry and Batterberry, “[t]he Paris of the 1920s was the city of the artist and writer’s café and bistro, where meals were served at all hours, of visits to artists’ studios and surprise parties, a world of café society in which the aristocracy and upper echelons of the bourgeoisie felt lucky to rub shoulders with the latest success,” and in this world, artists like Fitzgerald wrote (288). Other artists thrived in this atmosphere, and Coco Chanel was good friends with many of them, including Picasso, Stravinsky, and Hemingway. She exemplified the new woman in her business savvy as well as her art. F. Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald lived in this world as they wrote about it. Batterberry and Batterberry believe that the Fitzgeralds did the best job of capturing the “dizzy charm” of the post-war years (294). They spent a good deal of the 1920s living abroad; this is where many influential American texts were written. Additionally, *Tender Is the Night* is about American expatriates. American experiences abroad are influential because they reflect the influence of European fashions; additionally, trends of the expatriate lifestyle, manifest themselves in Fitzgerald’s work, for example, the popularity of the suntan, which became fashionable as a symbol of leisure in the 1920s. Women actually tried to become sunburnt as it was fashionable—it was attainable through cosmetics, but it was meant to evoke both athleticism and the fashionable vacationing in the Riviera (Batterberry and Batterberry 301).

The Harlem Renaissance

While the Lost Generation wrote and lived in Paris, another artistic group of Americans flourished in Harlem in New York City. The Harlem Renaissance is a literary movement that encompasses African American literature, art, and music of the 1920s. Jazz is an important component of this artistic movement for various reasons. It embodied the new culture of youth with its high energy, created an atmosphere for flappers and their companions to enjoy, and “was a radical departure from the past and became a symbol of the 1920s,” and provided a dance that necessitated new, loose and short clothing (Hannel 58). According to Hannel, the “energetic nature of jazz dances like



Fig. 2. Yellow dress: The Costume Institute, *Metropolitan Museum of Art*.

the Charleston and the Black Bottom” led to a “need for shorter evening dresses without sleeves” that would permit “the legs and arms to move with complete freedom”; even in decoration the clothing fit the dance as dresses had “skirts, fringe and beading that would fly away from the body like the arm and leg movements required by the dances” (Hannel 58). The dress in

Figure 2 is an example of a garment which would allow the strenuous movements of dancing without impeding the limbs. Even the flapper hairstyle fit the dance: since longer, pinned-up hair would never stay in place during one of these dances, bobbed hair was more appropriate

and, hence, fashionable. Fashion was not an isolated art; instead, it developed and changed along with other artistic forms.

The influence of jazz music on the Harlem Renaissance and its music and culture is important, including its influence on the clothing. The music grew to popularity during the First World War, but “the raucous, unorthodox jazz music of the 1920s ... eventually came to represent a critique of French life and a rejection of traditional values” because “it sounded like nothing ever before created and thus nourished the desire for a break with the war-torn past” and because “most people playing jazz in Paris were African Americans” viewed as exotic by the French (Hannel 60). Harlem became a center of jazz that was essential to New York nightlife, “all the while perpetuating the same stereotypes and rhetoric found in French magazines. By 1931 *Vogue* reported that ‘Every one can go to Harlem – and everyone does,’” which makes it an important cultural locus for this study (qtd. in Hannel 62). In Harlem, much like in Paris, “one could throw off the constraints of American morality. A guide to the nightlife of New York City in 1931 stated that Harlem, like Paris, ‘changes people. Especially the ‘proper’ kind, once they get into its swing’” (Hannel 63). Harlem’s jazz also influenced clothing, particularly because of the evolution of dance. Because the music was inherently dance music, the phenomenon “influenced the design of evening wear, including uneven handkerchief hems, fringe that swayed and made percussive sounds when the body moved, shiny fabrics that reflected light to the beat of that movement, and shorter hems which allowed the legs to move freely” (Hannel 65). This shorter hemline likely helped raise the everyday lengths of skirts.

Hostetler points out that Cheryl Wall notes the prominence, almost token, aspect of nightclubs in Harlem Renaissance works (Hostetler 40). Jazz came to play an influential role in the world as well as in the literature it heavily influenced. An example

of someone who used their image performatively is available in the “Paris-based American dancer and singer Josephine Baker” was quite popular and iconic (Hannel 61). “Despite the economic control and racial bias of whites, Baker was the master of her image” who made “millions” simply by “manipulating her onstage image to coincide with European and American expectations of the exotic” (Hannel 62). Hannel writes, “[b]y playing the less evolved, less civilized black woman, Baker allowed her audiences to feel superior and in control while at the same time providing a vicarious sexual experience forbidden in every day life” (62). In a similar way, Nella Larsen’s protagonist in *Quicksand* is shaped into this sexualized black woman in Denmark.

Important Designers: Coco Chanel and Paul Poiret

Two significant names influenced the changing world of fashion during this time period: Paul Poiret and Coco Chanel. Poiret played a large part in creating the New Woman; Chanel made her comfortable. According to Batterberry and Batterberry, Poiret “singlehandedly created the visual ideal of early 20th century womanhood” (268). Poiret was successful because “he gave women precisely what they had been wanting for some time,” freedom in their clothing that matched their new freedoms in the world (Batterberry and Batterberry 268). This freedom is exemplified in flowing tunics, new lines, and liberation from the corset. This freedom from corsetry inspired the rest of his fashion revolution. Instead of being supported by a “steel substructure radiating from the waist,” Poiret’s garments “flowed, in the manner of the Greek chiton, from two points of support at the shoulders,” creating a classical silhouette (Batterberry and Batterberry 268). His revolution included new fabrics, frequently gauze, chiffon, or crepe de Chine, but he also used darker and heavier materials at times, often displaying Oriental

influence. The design in Figure 3 is a dress of his from 1921. Poiret even “foresaw that women, whose daily life was becoming ‘masculinized,’ would eventually wear trousers” (Batterberry and Batterberry 274). Even perfumes were changed through Poiret’s lens of new femininity; his scents were spicier, more oriental, and meant to evoke images of a mysterious woman: “Thus, even in the way she smelled, the Victorian lady of purity and sweetness was replaced by the seductress” (Batterberry and Batterberry 276). Though Poiret’s influence precludes the war, it is helpful to know that the wheels of sartorial change were already turning. He kept designing, and though his elaborate changes eventually grew simplified, examining his styles suggests possibly that many of these drastic reactionary shifts in fashion were against Victorianism rather than the war. Though Poiret’s work was European, it was globally influential, including on Americans.

Coco Chanel, one of the most prominent and influential designers of the time, worked around the same time as Paul Poiret, but her work contrasted drastically with his ornate, Eastern designs. She created many of the innovations that shaped the 1920s, for instance, “the twin sweater set, crocheted lace, the leather belt, sailor pants, the short evening dress, the small hat, the relaxed coat with useful pockets, and, perhaps, most revolutionary of all, costume jewelry” (Batterberry 283-6). These elements of dress



Fig. 3. Red dress. Poiret, Paul. “Robe Sabat.” 1921. The Costume Institute, *Metropolitan Museum of Art*.

emphasized practicality and were above all affordable to more than just the upper echelons of society, building on Victorian innovations that allowed nearly any woman to participate in fashion. Instead of being accessible only for the wealthy, dressing in style was now a possibility for anyone. Chanel's designs are based on "the fact that it was no longer fitting or desirable for a woman, in the clothes she wore daily, to create the immediate impression of great wealth. Women now wanted elegance in line, cut and detail in clothes that did not, at first glance, appear obviously expensive" (Batterberry and Batterberry 286). This does not mean that signifiers of wealth were less important; on the contrary, they simply became more subtle. Chanel blended "haute couture" and "the style of the working girl," creating the "deluxe poor look" (Batterberry and Batterberry 286). Her response to this need was a line of "sweaters, trimmed with crisp white collars," "knitted suits," and the infamous little black dress, all components that support her belief that "women should never overdress during the day" (Batterberry and Batterberry 286). Though Poiret's philosophy of fashion was quite the contrary to this new style, which he fought "with richer silks and velvets, more extravagant motifs," his new ideas ultimately gave way to Chanel's simplicity (Batterberry and Batterberry 286).

According to Batterberry and Batterberry, Chanel "divined the true bent of postwar taste," and saw that "wartime necessity in clothes had become desired comfort" (280). She was an "exemplar of the new woman" whose life demonstrated the ways a person could rise above class (Batterberry and Batterberry 283). Born in 1883 to a poor family in Auvergne, Chanel eventually began working as a *cocotte*¹, and she had "dark hair, tiny features, and a perversely wide mouth" (Batterberry and Batterberry 283). Though she worked as an escort, she dressed simply instead of wearing their typical frou-

¹ "a sharp-tongued and amusing female companion" (Batterberry and Batterberry 283)

frou garments. When facing the choice between “life as a successful courtesan, amassing jewels and possessions while still young to tide her comfortably over her later years, or possibly a marriage if it could be managed, she made a 20th-century decision: she would do neither. She would live independently and she would work” (Batterberry and

Batterberry 283). Chanel was, in her choices as well

as her styles, an independent version of the “new woman.” She had both “training in millinery and couture” as well as “strong opinions as to how women should dress,” and she started her work by refashioning store-bought hats “into neat little models that appealed to the women she met in the increasingly sophisticated circles in which she

moved,” which became popular by 1905 (Batterberry

and Batterberry 283). She opened a shop in 1910,

learning that women wanted “more ‘sporty’ clothes”

and comfortable fabrics (Batterberry and Batterberry 283). Her use of jersey in high

fashion in 1915 led her into “couture,” where she went determined “to rid women of their frills from head to toe” because a lack of frills “makes one look younger” (Batterberry

and Batterberry 283). As mentioned before, youth was in vogue in every way imaginable,

including in the newly popular bobbed hair, attributable to “Poiret, who certainly made

the smaller head more fashionable; to the dancer Irene Castle, who shingled her hair for

freedom in movement; and to Chanel herself² (283). The dress in Figure 4, c. 1928, is an



Fig. 4. Red dress with bow. Chanel, Coco. “Evening Dress.” c. 1928. The Costume Institute, *Metropolitan Museum of Art*.

² Various accounts describe a story in which she was going to the opera, a heater exploded, and her hair got singed. So, she chopped off what was left, which led to others following her new hairstyle.

example of Chanel's simplified lines. Chanel's designs emphasize the highest commodity of the period: youth.

Class Distinction

For men, the war changed not only their role in society, but their role in the social caste system, especially in Europe. In the pre-war days, the idea that a gentleman's clothing "must be uncomfortable to distinguish him from the rest" was prevalent; however, the war all but did away with this mentality (Cunnington and Cunnington 221). Comfort was now more important, and it was somewhat "American," even in undergarments. For example, the influence of Americans changed men's underwear, introducing a "singlet in place of the buttoned vest and the union combination garment" (Cunnington and Cunnington 235). This American influence is largely related to class, which, according to Welters and Cunningham in "The Americanization of Fashion," is an element of American life that not only "affects and is affected by fashion"; social class in a society where you get to say who you are, and the appearance you craft to "signify identity" is the way you "say who you are in America" (Welters and Cunningham 4). Since the United States has what is called an "open-class society," clothing is certainly performative in the ways it can enable the wearer to traverse class lines (Welters and Cunningham 4). This will be exemplified and explored in depth in *The Great Gatsby* later in this thesis.

Class distinction was expressed not only through the fabrics on skin, but through the skin itself. Whereas for centuries, wealth was displayed through a light complexion, during the 1920s the ideal skin tone had shifted from a pallor to a suntan, which grew to popularity along with athleticism. Rather than signifying that a person had to work

outdoors, the suntan came to code that a person had leisure time to spend outside. Veblen claims

society [is] divided into two groups: those who work and remain pale, and those who [have] leisure time, engage in sports, and acquire tanned faces. Tanned skin, he argue[s], indicate[s] that one [is] not a city or office worker and ha[s] the time and money to bask in the sunlight. The suntan thus emerged as a status symbol signifying wealth. (Rubinstein 185)

As always, what is fashionable is in large part determined by what makes a person appear wealthy, despite changes in how wealth manifests itself. Class distinction, though it had a new face and fewer rules, had become more American, wherever you were, in the sense that anyone could, with enough time, obtain this tan and appearance. This was particularly liberating for women, who were now “no longer limited to presenting themselves as pale, demure, shy, and retiring, as dictated by puritanical conventions, and these characteristics were no longer requirements for marriage. Women could look tan and ‘modern,’ vigorous in appearance and action. Paleness had also been a characteristic of tuberculosis; suntans suggested youth and health” (Rubinstein 185-6). In this new world, health was fashionable for women, as was youth, for both sexes. The suntan is commented upon heavily in Fitzgerald’s *Tender Is the Night*, which will be looked at in a later chapter. Even Chanel was “photographed tanning her face” in 1918, and Keller notes that an “upsurge in athleticism began to reconfigure tanned skin as a symbol of health as well as of high class” (Keller 135).

Gender and Gender Roles

As gender roles were affected by the war, fashion changed accordingly. Although this was more prevalent in England, fashions came overseas to women who had, like their European counterparts, gone to work during wartime. During the war itself, European fashions were minimal. French women, who typically led the fashion scene, were so distracted by the war that fashion fell by the wayside. The changes the war brought about were not simply in the vein of women wanting to dress like nurses; rather, their lifestyles changed, which brought about changes in their garments. Before the war, wealthy women could dedicate their “ample leisure” to “dress and the direction of a battery of servants,” but after the war, particularly in Europe, everything changed as most servants went to war and women began working, either in their husband’s businesses or out of economic need. Batterberry and Batterberry write that the “absence of male employees gave women considerable opportunity. Moreover, a life of leisure was considered nothing less than unpatriotic” (278). Batterberry and Batterberry believe that the roles women played in the war explain why after the war, they were finally given the vote without much dissent. Even undergarments began “permitting freer movement” as the “inclination to reduce the layers which covered the body” grew in response to the “active life of the modern world” that had no room for so much unnecessary and obsolete clothing (Cunnington and Cunnington 219).

Although the war is frequently cited as the source of many of these changes, it acted primarily as a catalyst for reactionary changes and rebellion. Through contrasting the ways clothing built strict gender roles before and after the war, we can see ways in

which the rules became more flexible. Historian Helene Roberts refers to the 19th century, noting that even the colors helped to situate gender:

More than identifying each sex, clothing defined the role of each sex. Men were serious (they wore dark colors and little ornamentation), women were frivolous (they wore light pastel colors, ribbons, lace, and bows); men were active (their clothes allowed them movement), women inactive (their clothes inhibited movement); men were strong (their clothes emphasized broad shoulders and chests), women delicate (their clothing accentuated tiny waists, sloping shoulders, and a softly rounded silhouette); men were aggressive (their clothing had sharp definite lines and a clearly defined silhouette), women were submissive (their silhouette was indefinite, their clothing constricting. (qtd. in Kaiser 79)

During the nineteenth century, the ways clothing defined gender became obvious and marked. According to Kaiser, “men’s clothing came to epitomize the commercial or business spirit” (75). By contrast, the female ideal was frivolous and to-be-looked-at, a far cry from professional and independent. With the war and the onset of the twenty-first century, however, this all began to change. In the previous Victorian era, women “were socialized to value beauty as a means of power for obtaining (and keeping) a husband, males were immersed in a world of building character for purposes of achievement in the outside (public) world,” emphasizing “a contrast between being and doing” (Kaiser 80). Now, women were, to a limited degree, freer to work and live in the outside world as well as the inner one. Women could vote in America starting in 1920, and even the presidency encouraged progressive policies; for instance, “women were asked to abandon the steel corset for the war effort,” “were admitted to the army, the navy, and the Marine Corps,”

and they could “join the workforce and acquire independent economic means” (Rubinstein 237). Arguably, the “flapper fashion of the Roaring Twenties was an American invention made possible by these weak and passive presidents,” and its popularity is frequently attributed to the general “desire to seek mindless fun” in light of the “despair in response to the consequences of World War I”; additionally, this “fashion embodied the dynamism in the new technology and energy” (Rubinstein 238). As the 1920s began, new icons, including that of the flapper, emerged. Some have claimed that the flapper image of the 1920s “appeared full-blown to throw off grim recollections of World War I”; however, “the vision of the dizzy 1920s emerged more slowly” (Batterberry and Batterberry 278-9).

Kaiser attributes changing gender ideology during the 1900s to three themes: “the feminine mystique,” the “increasing role of women in the workforce,” and the “changing nature of male’s roles” (86-7). Male clothing remained relatively stable due to the “restricted code of the commercial work ethic” exemplified in the business suit (Kaiser 84). Women’s clothing unwritten rules were more flexible, but starting with World War I, women could even “formally wear military attire” (Rubinstein 99). As the twentieth century began, “the expanding economy and increasing military needs in the United States encouraged women to move out of the home and into factories, offices, schools, hospitals, and shops,” and the new ideal woman was signified in the outfit of the Gibson girl, creation of Charles Dana Gibson, of the 1890s and early 1900s, “a shirtwaist blouse and a tailored skirt” (Rubinstein 100). This ensemble was both practical and liberating, allowing women to work and play sports. According to Rubinstein, “Feminists at the time saw the Gibson girl as the prototype of the new woman— ‘braver, stronger, more

beautiful, and more skillful and able and free, more human in all ways' than the traditional woman"; her appearance was particularly apt because by 1911 at least five million women supported themselves, and, thankfully, mass production of shirtwaist blouses enabled them to wear the costume of the Gibson girl to work³ (Rubinstein 100).

In this period, women's clothing began to reflect excess leisure in subtle, comfortable ways. Even for those who were not wealthy, comfort and practicality in fashion opened up liberties for them.



Fig. 5. Mary Campbell, Miss America 1922-1923. "Miss America 1922-1923 Mary Campbell." *Miss America By the Decades, 1921-1939*.

Both hairstyles and hemlines shortened. According to Rubinstein, "[b]y 1924, the naked neck appeared longer, and women played nervously with their necklaces, flourishing long cigarette holders," evoking "both admiration and rebuke" (238). Miss America Mary Campbell, pictured in Figure 5, "reflected characteristics of contemporary commercial art and the new expectations for the modern woman—active and healthy" (Rubinstein 154). Health was considered beautiful, unlike in the 1800s when death was glorified, and during

the summer of 1928 *Vogue* reported that in Paris 'narrow hips' were de rigueur and that to tan was fashionable. The boyish look was considered beautiful, for it accommodated the demands of the camera for long legs and a hipless body.

Fashion copy described the advantages of the new look, asserting that short skirts

³ Shirtwaists could be bought for \$1.50 and a suit for \$10, according to Rubinstein (100).

allowed a free and swinging walk that showed a graceful length of limb.

(Rubinstein 154)

Even still, to be beautiful required wealth.

Although in some ways the new woman was liberated and pro-female, some of the changes were less liberatory due to the vast multitude of factors that affect style changes. For example, “the influence of industrialization in the apparel industry” during the 1920s, which can be seen in “simple lines that could be mass produced,” went along with the “new freedoms experienced by women who had become economically independent during World War I” (Kaiser 84). However, feminist Susan Brownmiller questions the liberatory stance of the flapper. She writes,

The evolution from long skirts to short in the 1920s was an important advance in the history of women’s rights. By a cut of the scissors in a dressmaker’s salon, women were able to walk and move with greater freedom than they had been allowed in centuries. Gone was the dragging weight of several layers of petticoats, and yards of heavy fabric that swirled around the ankles were thrown aside in a single stroke of fashion. From breast to thigh, the torso was liberated from the restraining corset. But the transformation of women’s legs from a bodily part that was hidden in modesty to a glamorous appendage that was whistled at and admired may not have been a remarkable gain. Both extremes of fashion derived from a belief in the seductive nature of female, sexuality, and both sought to minimize the true function of legs. (qtd. in Kaiser 85)

Brownmiller’s point is that although the new short dresses allowed women freedom in their movements, the ideology that objectified women’s bodies was still prevalent. To go

along with the new garments, “[b]reasts were bound” and hair was cropped, using “borrowed symbolism from masculine appearance” that reflects the “power differential,” which is “further indicated by the emergence of beauty contests for women” and the new status of fashion and beauty, which was now “big business” (Kaiser 86). The new “feminine ideal” was “linear and active”; (Rubinstein 154). Even beauty contests of the time were no longer curvy, instead boasting athletic builds. With fewer corsets, women paid instead for makeup and adornments. Wealth still drove the fashion industry; however, women could play a more active role in it.

The Flappers and Zelda Fitzgerald

The image of the flapper comes to mind for most people when they envision the 1920s. The flapper persona “was only one of many incarnations of the new woman. Less publicized but perhaps more influential was the new ‘thinking woman,’ the antithesis of the mindless flapper” (Batterberry and Batterberry 300). This is because in the 1920s a “university education for women became more than a rare exception,” which led to a “female intelligentsia” including the likes of Gertrude Stein in Paris and New York (Batterberry and Batterberry 300). Women were now participants in academia, politics, and even athletics. Heroines became less passive, and although many still used their looks and beauty to obtain their goals, they became healthier and more interesting, for instance, Jordan Baker in *The Great Gatsby*. Jordan Baker is the “ideal” type of 1920s woman: she is jaunty and athletic, the picture of health: “a slender, small-breasted girl, with an erect carriage, which she accentuated by throwing her body backward at the shoulders” (Fitzgerald 11). This small-breasted figure who stands tall is an example of the new woman, the new idea of what femininity could look like.

As an example of and champion for the flappers, it is interesting to look at Zelda Fitzgerald's persona and her own writing. As far as flapperdom goes, Nancy Milford refers to Zelda as "the first American Flapper" (Milford x). She is notorious for being flamboyant, edgy, and fashionable, and magazines frequently requested editorials from her on art but also on her flapper persona and her fashion. Her work as a female living in this time demonstrates the goals of the flapper lifestyle; additionally, her role as Scott's wife and muse lends meaning to his work and construction of the Jazz Age. Since the Fitzgeralds spent much time abroad as expatriates, their perspectives regarding fashion and the world may have differed from that of the typical American; however, fashion is used similarly in Fitzgerald's work and in Larsen's and Fauset's. In a review of her husband's newest novel, *The Beautiful and the Damned* (1922), Zelda seeks to come across humorously, noting that she wants people to buy the book so she can spend money. She writes,

everyone must buy this book for the following aesthetic reasons: first, because I know where there is the cutest cloth-of-gold dress for only three hundred dollars in a store on Forty-second street, and also, if enough people buy it, where there is a platinum ring with a complete circlet, and also, if loads of people buy it, my husband needs a new winter overcoat, although the one he has has done well enough for the last three years. ("Friend Husband's Latest" 387)

Here, Zelda sassily builds a public persona that is shallow and enjoys expensive clothes. Although her words are saturated with humor, her persona as a flapper and her articles on the lifestyle lend us insight that demonstrates ways in which the persona was often built by her.

In “Eulogy on the Flapper” (1922), Zelda notes that being a Flapper is almost too popular because it has become imitative, mimetic, and is no longer edgy. She describes the flapper, whom she claims is dead, though her claim far precedes the actual end of the phenomenon. The primary goal of a flapper is, in her eyes, to avoid the chief sin of being boring (391). After the trend grew popular, she believes that the movement has committed its own chief sin: it has become boring. She writes, “the first Flappers are so secure in their positions that their attitude toward themselves is scarcely distinguishable from that of their debutante sisters of ten years ago toward *themselves*. . . . They are blasé. . . . Flapperdom has become a game; it is no longer a philosophy” (“Eulogy” 391-392). Whereas she previously viewed the icon as revolutionary, she perceives that it is now simply a game that young (and not-so-young) women play at to be interesting.

Zelda finds the idea that Flapperism caused crime and societal upheaval ridiculous. She notes that many do not approve of “Flapperdom” because of its cynicism; however, she claims that embracing this persona makes young women “intelligent” and teaches “them to capitalize their natural resources and get their money’s worth. They are merely applying business methods to being young” (“Eulogy” 393). Here we see the commodification of youth put to very specific goals. Zelda’s writings and articles, though often tongue-in cheek, reveal ways in which women were using fashion and their appearances to get what they wanted. Zelda believes that the flapper is “an involuntary and invaluable cupbearer to the arts” and an “artist in her particular field, the art of being—being young, being lovely, being an object. For almost the first time we are developing a class of pretty yet respectable young women, whose sole functions are to amuse and to make growing old a more enjoyable process for some men and staying

young an easier one for others” (“What Became of the Flappers” 398). Her words, though they must be taken with a grain of salt, are problematic as well insightful to the movement. Whereas many perceive flapperdom as a feminist movement, Zelda’s writings make me think that the movement was, while liberatory in some ways, not as freeing as many would like to believe. She is incredibly rebellious and opinionated, but her brand of feminism seems to capitalize on the benefits of performing femininity in a certain way rather than opening up the door for equality. Although these women think and are invested in the arts, flappers, according to Zelda, poured a good deal of energy into crafting objectifiable personas that would cast them as motivators for male artists. Nonetheless, Nancy Milford, biographer of Zelda Fitzgerald, writes that Zelda saw “Flapperdom” as “a curative against the ills of society” that had the power to “make young women intelligent” applying “by business acumen to femininity”: women could create themselves “as a product,” show themselves off “with all the flair of a good advertising campaign,” and see the ways in which their lives would benefit (92). Milford writes that “[w]omen were to dramatize themselves in their youth, to experiment and be gay; in their old age (in their forties) they would be magically content” (Milford 92).

Shifting Erogenous Zones

As examined earlier, erogenous zones tend to shift to enhance feminine ability to attract male attention. By focusing on and sexualizing a different part of the body, some theorists posit that women are better able to attract and maintain male attention. The changing silhouette and hem lengths of the 1920s reveal previously mentioned shifting erogenous zones. In addition to a less curvaceous figure, a significant change in line occurred as for “almost the first time since antiquity, something slightly more than the

foot peeked out beneath ladies' skirts, which remained severe and quite demure nonetheless" (Batterberry and Batterberry 278). Remember, modesty is culturally constructed, and a change in line does not imply a change in modesty (although we see that here as well). Legs were the new erogenous zone, notably, with "stockings rolled at the rouged knee, a whole new kind of sex appeal had been created" (Batterberry and Batterberry 297). Since women's fashion is frequently crafted with the goal of sexual attraction, this shift helps to keep things interesting. Not only were legs visible for the first time, but their appearance also led to a new way of moving for women. Batterberry and Batterberry write that "[t]he loose, short dresses allowed the freedom of nudity itself" (297). Not only was the hemline rising, but also, by 1922, waistlines had dropped to the hips, emphasizing the boyish and youthful figure. All of these elements are visible in Figure 6. This shape was built by the underclothing, which "no longer functioned to emphasize hetero-sexual features but, on the contrary, to obliterate them. ... The change marked more than just the end of a war; it betokened the end of an ancient attitude of mind, of a defensive taboo, and perhaps—of a means of attack" (Cunnington and Cunnington 221). By 1924, skirts had become much shorter, reaching only mid-calf. A simple, straight line was in vogue, and bust and hips were out. Skirts reached their shortest lengths in 1926 and 1927, and various decorative touches such as "pleats, flounces, circular gores," or "handkerchief points" all helped "distract from the basic exhibitionism of the design," and as dresses got shorter, pearl strands grew longer (Batterberry and Batterberry 296-297).

Women enjoyed wearing men's fashions such as "[b]lazers ... with pleated skirts, shirts with ties and cuff links, and tailor-mades ... constructed like men's suits and even dinner jackets" (Batterberry and Batterberry 303). This usage of men's clothing is a performative way in which women could use an "androgynous sexuality" to declare their "emancipation," and although this style of women wearing men's dress as it was "never enjoyed a wide currency," its "existence gave women the assurance that anything was possible and that their own fashions were not a matter of dictation but choice"

(Batterberry and Batterberry 303). In choosing what they wanted to wear, they could send rhetorical messages that they were powerful, like men, and they could individually define and create their images and identities. As women began to wear pants and shorter hemlines, they were taking the abilities and rights afforded them during the war and maintaining them.

If we again turn to one of the most influential designers, we can see how Chanel not only used clothing to create a new woman who was comfortable and practical; she was also powerful. Women wearing male dress to obtain some of their power and charm is a centuries old practice that faded out in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; however, Chanel tapped into this when, chilly at a race, she "borrowed a polo player's sweater, belted it, and pushed the sleeves up," quickly using this image to create a line of sweaters that "sold immediately" (Rubinstein



Fig. 6. Dress with bow from: Martha Weathered, Inc. "Evening Dress." ca. 1925. The Costume Institute, *Metropolitan Museum of Art*.

108). Chanel also introduced other traditionally male components of dress into the female sphere, including “the leather belt, sailor pants, and the twin set, a combination of matching cardigan and pullover worn together. Chanel was also one of the first women to cut her hair short” (Rubinstein 110). The ensemble in Figure 7 demonstrates Chanel’s masculinized feminine dress. By wearing these traditionally male elements of dress, women could perform something other than merely sexual attraction through their clothing. They could demonstrate that the new women were stronger, powerful, and more



Fig. 7. Ensemble from: Chanel, Coco. “Ensemble.” ca. 1927. The Costume Institute, *Metropolitan Museum of Art*.

independent, even in their sartorial choices.

American Media and Fashion

In addition to these designers, changes in media brought about new icons, particularly in the United States. Films paraded “chorus girls and movie stars” as the “it” girls, conveying “the message that any woman with beauty and talent could dance or sing her way to the top,” viewing these women as “modern Cinderellas” whose stories were read by all sorts of women who wanted to emulate them (Rubinstein 117). The media rose these ideas to icons for women, and

the radiance of these female movie stars sparked an interest in emulating these stars’ images. According to Rubinstein, “[w]omen regarded movie stars as experts on appearance”; for example, “[e]verything Gloria Swanson did was news. She became the epitome of elegance and feminine enchantment. When she bobbed her hair in the early

1920s, millions of women rushed to have their hair cut,” despite the centuries long tradition of long hair contrasting with the idea that short hair was “an affront” and a “violation of the norm of modesty” (Rubinstein 117). Now, short hair was chic, classy, and admirable. In *Plum Bun*, when Virginia arrives in New York, she sports bobbed hair, signifying her status as a young, “new” woman of the world.

In America, since women had no queen or princess to look to, the stars of the screen frequently became the inspiration for fashion. By dressing like a star, a woman had a chance to become one. Garments could perform not only one’s class and femininity, but one’s race to the top, something we will see exemplified in Rosemary in *Tender Is the Night*. Clara Bow’s flapper image with “bee-stung lips, a headband only just controlling her tousled bob, and her soul emanating from the new erogenous zone, the legs,” was an icon (Batterberry and Batterberry 297). As an icon whom many women emulated in their style of dress, Bow’s exposed legs inspired women to raise their hemlines too. Movie stars set fashion in motion, and F. Scott Fitzgerald believed that Joan Crawford was “doubtless the best example of the flapper, the girl you see at smart night clubs, gowned to the apex of sophistication ... dancing deliciously, laughing a great deal, with wide, hurt eyes” (qtd. in Batterberry and Batterberry 296). Among others, these stars helped solidify these new styles and shapes.

Glorification of Youth

Fashion always reflects what a culture values, and in this culture, it is clear that youth became a sort of currency. This is noteworthy because, as a primary commodity, youth opened up fashion and class for anyone with some degree of money to participate. This youthfulness became more lauded in the ideal silhouette for both men and women.

Among other changes, Hannel notes that women “gained the right to vote” in 1920 along with many young women “attend[ing] college and ... making a living for themselves,” and a “new youth culture” was emerging (Hannel 58). This youthful ideal can be traced in undergarments particularly, given that they create the ideal silhouettes for any given era. A new “attitude of mind” existed in this period, an attitude in which,

the actual surface of the body ... was to be exploited. A kind of ‘skin worship’ became almost a new religion. Devotees tanned their bodies by sunlight, real or artificial, or by stains; women improved their faces by paints, lotions, and skin foods containing – it was hoped – the latest hormones, to say nothing of powders of every conceivable shade. To concentrate attention on the face they cut off their hair and tore out their eyebrows. It was accompanied by an outlook and habits essentially juvenile, and the juvenile shape of body became the feminine ideal, described enthusiastically by a fashion writer as ‘such enchanting, sexless, bosomless, hipless, thighless creatures.’ It was the glorification of youth.

(Cunnington and Cunnington 234)

In this period, small hips and breasts were fashionable for women, and they could be seen because “[t]he actual outlines of the body itself were no longer disguised through the intermediary of complex lingerie” (Cunnington and Cunnington 220). Fauset demonstrates the new popular physique in *Plum Bun*: both Virginia and Angela are “possessed of the modern slenderness” (52). The bra appeared in 1916, and it is notable that American women wore them, influencing the world to likewise embrace this new garment (Cunnington and Cunnington 229). In stark contrast to earlier decades, now, “a brassière and short panties under a dance frock were considered adequate” (Cunnington

and Cunnington 235). Although one might assume that this “widespread reduction” in undergarments is primarily “erotic in purpose,” Cunnington and Cunnington believe that this is incorrect because “young women were at great pains to obliterate the breasts and to reduce the feminine shape of the hips... while the actual regions which were exposed bare by day were the arms, and the legs below the knee, a kind of display very characteristic of childhood but which has only slight sex appeal” (Cunnington and Cunnington 235). Instead of wearing less to be sexy, women wore less to appear younger and healthier.

Bare skin itself began to be revealed in far more copious amounts; Cunnington and Cunnington believe this is an example of the rebellious spirit “opposed to the symbols of class distinction in costume” because there is “no more thoroughly democratic fabric than bare skin” (234). Additionally, there was a “desire to strip off conventional trammels, especially those associated with the previous generation responsible for the war. A popular longing to return to ‘the simple life’ is not uncommon when civilization has got into a thorough mess. What more desperate resource than a nudity camp?” (Cunnington and Cunnington 235). This line of thought led to an incredible reduction in undergarments so that skin was frequently just covered by one layer of fabric; underclothing “no longer preserved the warmth of the body” nor “disguise[d] its essential shape” (Cunnington and Cunnington 235). This is also likely in part due to the fact that people bathed more frequently.

The newly exposed legs were often covered with “flesh-colored silk stockings,” which actress Yvonne Printemps told Paris paper *Candide* were evidence that women dressed for fashion instead of men: “That women do not dress for men may be seen in the

fact that although men prefer black silk stockings on women, yet women all wear tan and other light colors because they are fashionable, and in spite of the fact that they make the ankles look larger” (qtd. in Batterberry and Batterberry 297). This idea counters the idea that women dress primarily for men or for sexual attraction; the new woman dressed for social distinction and fashion. Now that a woman could earn her own place in society, she need not marry wealthy to obtain one, although some women, like Angela in *Plum Bun*, try nonetheless. Instead, she could dress with different goals. Sexual attraction still influenced female dress, but it now became a performance of class distinction as well as individuality.

As demonstrated through these historical examples, clothing changed in various ways during the 1920s. This historical foundation reminds us that these works are about people who would dress in the clothing of their times. During this time period, clothing enabled performances of all kinds, whether they were for class distinction, rebelling against traditional gender roles, or sexual attraction. Wearers, regardless of race or gender, performed roles in the world in these clothes which, in turn, enabled their individual, purposeful performances. In the chapters to come, we will explore ways in which these concepts manifested themselves not simply in real life, but also in the literature that the period birthed.

CHAPTER III

GATSBEAN UNIFORMS:

CHIFFON DRESSES, MILITARY GARB, AND THE INFAMOUS PINK SUIT

F. Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald are frequently considered embodiments of the spirit of the 1920s, which Fitzgerald coined the “Jazz Age.” Scott’s novels and stories are powerful artifacts of the era. His works and the duo’s larger than life personas are iconic and frequently the subjects of authors both scholarly and non-scholarly; however, there is benefit in applying my lens of understanding clothing as performative in the real world and on the page to familiar texts that powerfully encapsulate and define the zeitgeist of the 1920s. Furthermore, Fitzgerald gives a perspective of an American living abroad. In Paris, American jazz and American artists were exciting new imports that helped to create the microcosmic America in Paris that, in turn, kindled their work. Even Poiret believed that in 1927 “we in France [were] slaves to the American influence” (qtd. in Hannel 60). Fitzgerald believed that the Jazz Age “marks the passage of ‘the style of man’ to America,” a passage that “signifies a much more meaningful transfer of global power from Great Britain to the United States” (Rule-Maxwell 57). In the post-war age that afforded Americans great wealth, they also had the “prerogative to decide ‘what was fashionable and what was fun,’ but nonetheless they sought clothes produced by Bond Street tailors and continued to fashion themselves ... after British models” (Rule-Maxwell 58). Particularly the upper classes followed, to an extent, European standards

because within these traditional structures lay a great deal of socioeconomic symbolism and meaning. Though their clothing might have looked different and been freer, underlying American dress was the European impulse: to demonstrate one's social class through one's clothing. What was new, however, was the ability for a person with any sort of economic means to "fake" their class. This performance of social class through clothing shapes all of the characters in *The Great Gatsby*.

In *The Great Gatsby*, clothing serves as one of Fitzgerald's primary motifs and signs used to symbolize wealth; additionally, characters use clothing as a means to achieve their goals. Fitzgerald's descriptions of clothing are particularly relevant when we consider ways in which each character in the novel performs a role, largely through costuming. Daisy notes how "sophisticated" she is, and Nick feels "the basic insincerity of what she had said," which makes him "uneasy, as though the whole evening had been a trick of some sort" (Fitzgerald 17). This trick can frequently be related to sartorial choices that manifest themselves as costumes or disguises. This "basic insincerity" Nick feels reinforces the idea that in this novel, what is on the surface is not necessarily what lies beneath. What we see is not reality, and garments, like so much in the novel, frequently conceal what lies beneath. Whether we consider Daisy and Jordan's act as ingenues, Myrtle's attempt to emulate Daisy in her affair with Tom, or Gatsby's performance of wealth, clothing is an integral component of their performances.

Daisy and Jordan use clothing to perform as innocent women, to create a facade of purity that conceals moral depravity below. They are not physically violent, but their innocent demeanors and clothing cover bodies that lie, cheat, and selfishly treat others as ends to their own gain. When we are introduced to Jordan and Daisy, they are "both in

white, and their dresses were rippling and fluttering as if they had just been blown back in after a short flight around the house” (Fitzgerald 8). They both wear white symbolically because the clothing of the genteel and wealthy disguises their carelessness and moral decay. They appear innocent; they are not. They use clothing to embody a moral performance of the women they want to appear like but truly are not. Daisy notes that they passed their “white girlhood” in Louisville, a girlhood of innocence she appears to have but has actually lost (Fitzgerald 19). In addition to symbolizing innocence, white can signify youth. In the 1920s, youth was the highest commodity available, and in the novel, youth is utilized to get out of trouble. Like a child who relies on her young age to avoid the consequences of their actions, Daisy lies and evades punishment for killing Myrtle and for having an affair. Likewise, Jordan is a perpetual liar. As Schneider writes, “Both Jordan and Daisy are enchanting—but false. And Nick’s attitude toward them is identical with his attitude toward life in the East” (249). These women and the East are intriguing, but ultimately hollow, for Nick.

Scholars writing on *The Great Gatsby* frequently note Fitzgerald’s use of color symbolism. Critic Daniel Schneider notes the prominence of the color white in the novel. He writes that this “light-dark symbolism is employed with great care,” and though he agrees that “[w]hite traditionally symbolizes purity, and there is no doubt that Fitzgerald wants to underscore the ironic disparity between the ostensible purity of Daisy and Jordan and their actual corruption,” he argues further that white is also “strongly associated with airiness, buoyancy, levitation” (Schneider 247). Even on the day of the climax of the novel, they lie on the couch “like silver idols weighing down their own white dresses against the singing breeze of the fans” (Fitzgerald 115). They are white

idols, worshipped creatures of innocence who, upon further investigation, have little substance. Schneider writes that both women are “to both Gatsby and Nick—a bit unreal, like fairy’s (Daisy’s maiden name is Fay); and they are in white because, as we learn in Chapter VII, to wear white is to be ‘an absolute little dream,’” a dream that Daisy, dressed in white, embodies (Schneider 248). Kevin Rea, author of “The Colour of Meaning in *The Great Gatsby*,” argues that a color’s significance is dependent on its “emotional context”; furthermore, colors are used to “communicate the moral, social, and spiritual dimensions of the work as deeply as any of the other more obvious symbols in the novel” (Rea 28). White, gold, silver, blue, and pink all play heavy symbolic roles.

As one of the predominant symbolic colors in the novel, gold is especially relevant in its connotations of wealth as well as the idolatry of American consumerism. Rea notes the connection between idols and the color gold. This connection is also made by Schneider, who writes that

except in Gatsby’s extravagant imagination, the white does not exist pure: it is invariably stained by the money, the yellow. Daisy is the white flower—with the golden center. If in her virginal beauty she ‘dressed in white, and had a little white roadster,’ she is, Nick realizes, ‘high in a white palace the king’s daughter, the golden girl.’ Her voice is ‘like money’; she carries a ‘little gold pencil’; when she visits Gatsby there are ‘two rows of brass buttons on her dress.’ As for the ‘incurably dishonest’ Jordan, she displays a ‘slender golden arm’ and ‘a golden shoulder’; her fingers are ‘powdered white over their tan’; the lamp-light shines ‘bright on ... the autumn-leaf yellow of her hair.’ (Schneider 248)

One of the main messages of the novel itself is that love is tainted by money. Fitzgerald uses the contrast between gold, white, and yellow to demonstrate ways in which consumerism and capitalism are driving forces in the novel. These forces create tension as well as frustration for Fitzgerald, Gatsby, and Nick.

In addition to deepening the symbolism of monetary influence in the novel, silver and gold are worn by Daisy and Jordan, who seem to become idols of silver and gold.

Schneider continues,

When [Jordan] enters the hotel with Daisy, both are wearing ‘small tight hats of metallic cloth’; and when Nick sees them both lying on the couch a second time, they are ‘like silver idols weighing down their own white dresses against the singing breeze of the fans’—the silver, of course, symbolizing both the dream and the reality, since as the color of the romantic stars and the moon (the first time we observe Gatsby he is gazing up at the ‘silver pepper of the stars’) it is clearly associated with the romantic hope and promise that govern Gatsby’s life, and as the color of money it is obviously a symbol of corrupt materialism. (248)

Nick eventually apostasizes from his idolatry of Jordan by the end of the book; Gatsby dies while he is realizing that the Daisy he has worshipped is in large part a figment of his idealized imagination.

Just as Daisy and Jordan use certain colors in their clothing to craft a certain image, Tom’s mistress, Myrtle, also uses various elements of clothing in performative ways. Clothing matters to Myrtle. She complains that when she married George, he “borrowed somebody’s best suit to get married in”; clearly things of wealth are important to her, and she is upset that George put on a mask to marry her (Fitzgerald 35). She

recalls her introduction to Tom differently, with attention to his clothes: “a dress suit and patent leather shoes” with a “white shirt-front”—all of these clothing elements are markers of wealth (Fitzgerald 36). From these details, we can infer that Myrtle cares deeply about material goods and being with a rich man; sadly, she is not. Clothing here is a symbol that reflects class distinction. As Americans who have the chance, both Myrtle and her husband have aspirations to climb the social ladder, as noted by Kevin Rea. He writes that “[b]oth she and Wilson aspire; Wilson towards masculine success and a shiny blue car, Myrtle towards the owner of the blue car and all the success his attire promises”; however, the color blue, connected to the car and its owner, is a color “most easily connected both to vitality and doomed, unrealistic aspirations” (Rea 28). In addition to symbolizing this unattainable goals, blue reflects the emotions that surface when a character’s dreams are simply unfulfillable. Material objects matter to both; furthermore, Myrtle’s various changes of clothing reveal a good deal about her performance.

When we meet Myrtle, she wears a “dark blue *crépe-de-chine*,” which she changes out of to rendezvous with Tom in the city, selecting instead a “brown figured muslin, which stretched tight over her rather wide hips” (25, 27). Her new costume is sensual and warm. These earth-toned colors and fabrics contrast heavily with Daisy’s light palette and airy chiffon garments. Even in the way they dress, Myrtle and Daisy are opposites. Daisy is light, airy, girlish. Myrtle is warm, sensuous, and sexy. At first, we think that Myrtle’s visual look is meant to be the antithesis of Daisy’s, but upon further reflection, it appears that Myrtle’s sartorial choices are indicative of a desire to play the role of an ersatz Daisy. Once they arrive at the tryst, Myrtle changes again, this time into “an elaborate afternoon dress of cream-colored chiffon, which gave out a continual

rustle” (30). Notably, this dress is more like something Daisy might wear—it is light colored and in an airy fabric. She is now dressed more like Tom’s wife, and with her change in garment comes a change in personality: “The intense vitality that had been so remarkable in the garage was converted into impressive hauteur. Her laughter, her gestures, her assertions became more violently affected moment by moment, and as she expanded the room grew smaller around her” (30-1).

Myrtle has disguised herself in the fashion of Daisy, and as she performs her role as Tom’s mistress she takes on a persona which she perhaps believes is more like Daisy, with a voice full of money and carelessness. When asked about her new gown Myrtle disdainfully replies that it is “just a crazy old thing” that she puts on “when I don’t care what I look like”; her bravado here reflects an interpretation of how she perceives Daisy might discuss her own clothes (31). In assuming a costume like Daisy’s, she puts on a new attitude as well as a haughty, disdainful air one might associate with wealth. In his article, Schneider reaches a similar conclusion about Myrtle’s clothing. He writes that she “is transformed into the money-stained dream-girl, the Daisy or the Jordan” when she puts on cream chiffon (254). I further suggest that Myrtle performs for Tom as well as the attendees of their afternoon party, putting on an act that she thinks will please them. Additionally, this performance allows her to act out her own fantasy of wealth.

In considering Gatsby’s wardrobe, color symbolism is again noteworthy. On the day of the novel’s climax, Tom mocks him for his “pink suit” (122). Later, Nick notes that this is a garish outfit, waiting outside the house late at night he can “think of nothing except the luminosity of his pink suit under the moon” (143). This pink suit undergoes a change again. When Nick leaves, he notes that Gatsby’s “gorgeous pink rag of a suit

made a bright spot of color against the white steps,” a spot of color that is gorgeous, not ugly or embarrassing or humiliating (154). Schneider believes that this pink suit is a blending of white and red, representing “the color of the dream stained by violence” (252). Gatsby’s suit “would seem to be not merely gaudy but blood-stained. Gatsby remains incorruptible, but his house and his clothes reveal the sordidness of the reality” (Schneider 253). Nick can see that Gatsby is a good person on the inside; wearing pink instead of white reflects this. Underneath, he has substance, and he is driven by a dream. When Nick discovers his true self, “‘Jay Gatsby’ had broken up like glass against Tom’s hard malice, and the long secret extravaganza was played out” (148). Gatsby’s costume no longer carries him into the world; humiliated by Tom, he knows he does not belong in the world of the Buchanans.

In many ways, clothes allow us to trace the trajectory of Gatsby’s life. We learn that when he met Dan Cody as James Gatz, he was wearing “a torn green jersey and a pair of canvas pants,” but by the time the two had interacted, Gatz changes his name and his clothes (98). When Dan Cody reclothes him a few days later, he practically baptizes him into a new career with greater upward mobility, symbolized in the clothes he now has: “a blue coat, six pairs of white duck trousers, and a yachting cap” (100). Now, Gatsby is not an aspiring youth; he is a sailor. He later exchanges this uniform for a military uniform, which he eventually trades in for his array of fancy shirts and bright colored suits that will enable him to woo Daisy. He recalls when he met Daisy, he was “a penniless young man without a past, and at any moment the invisible cloak of his uniform might slip” (149). Even when he first met Daisy, his clothing concealed who he really was. Dressed as a military man, he could get away with things that his real background

would never have afforded him the chance to grasp at. Even Meyer Wolfsheim, who claims he made Gatsby's fortune for him, notes that when they met Gatsby was "[a] young major just got out of the army and covered over with medals he got in the war. He was so hard up he had to keep on wearing his uniform because he couldn't buy some regular clothes" (170-1). He had honor, hopes, and medals, but no money. He used his uniform to get him into a place where he could make money and real clothes, clothes that allow him to perform a role even more effectively.

Gatsby is, in many ways, a self-made man who creates his persona through the clothing he wears. By dressing as a rich American, he is treated well; however, the split between old money and new money in the novel keeps him from earning his true prize. He has nonetheless learned that clothing allows him to play the part. The clothes worn by Gatsby himself are described in sense of color and richness: he owns a "caramel colored suit," a characteristic pink suit, and he dresses to see Daisy for the first time "in a white flannel suit, silver shirt, and gold-colored tie" (Fitzgerald 64, 84). These colors combine perhaps to reflect his wealth. Silver and gold fabrics should, hypothetically, appeal to a woman wooed by Tom's old money. His whole purpose is to show her that now, he can take care of her with his acquired wealth. Gatsby uses clothing and flashy colors in particular, to show off his newly acquired social status—an "American" accomplishment. He owns a white suit; like her, he dresses in white to reflect their past and innocence and youth, to repeat the past as he so dearly wishes to do. As Nick observes, Gatsby "wanted to recover something, some idea of himself perhaps, that had gone into loving Daisy"; he simply wants to "return to a certain starting place" and try again (110).

Gatsby's attempts to repeat the past surface in the manner in which he dresses and grooms himself to fit a specific mold. In "*The Great Gatsby* and the Arrow Collar Man," Thomas Dilworth may have found this mold. He notes Fitzgerald's various allusions to the Arrow Collar Man, a figure used in advertising in the early 1900s to sell men's wear, and he further posits that Daisy references him, drawing direct parallels between this ideal Arrow Collar Man and Gatsby himself. Dilworth believes that Daisy directly alludes to seeing Gatsby as the advertising icon. Dilworth notes that "because this intervisuality involves clothing as defining personal image, it suggests targeted social engagement, disguise, pretense or performance, and evokes the false yet powerful cliché, 'clothes make the man'" (81). Evidently, Fitzgerald himself resembled this clean-cut, well-groomed man, as would have "any well-heeled, well-groomed, nattily dressed, handsome young man" (83). Gatsby's resemblance to the Arrow Collar Man is likely an intentional allusion by Fitzgerald and by Daisy, a reference that historically grounds *The Great Gatsby's* iconic style. As depicted in Figure 8, the advertising man from Arrow Collar was "extremely handsome, well-knit, well-off, well-groomed—the male equivalent of the Gibson girl of an earlier generation. His expression is almost always calm, introspective, or blasé—the 1920s equivalent of 'cool.'" (Dilworth 83). Gatsby is frequently described as

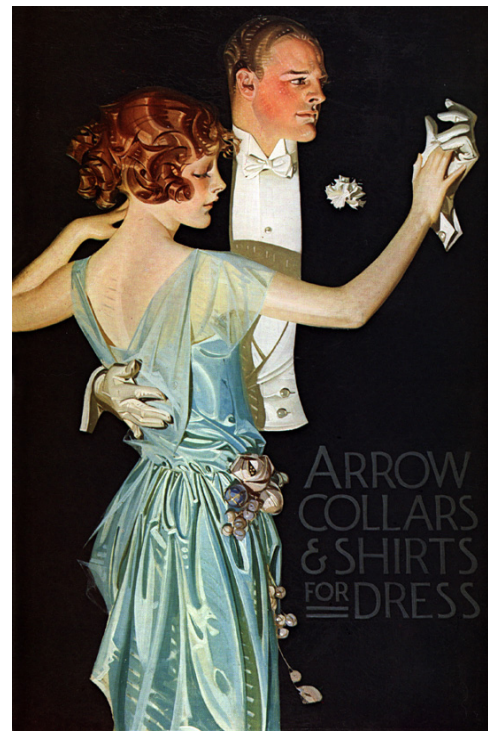


Fig. 8. Arrow Collar Man from: Mister Crew. "The Arrow Collar Man." *MisterCrew*, 7 Sept. 2010.

“cool,” especially by Daisy, who “seems to see in Gatsby a resemblance to the same iconic figure” (Dilworth 85). The Arrow Collar Man was so omnipresent that Dilworth believes “the contemporary reader of *The Great Gatsby* would be expected to catch the allusion” (85). The fictional Arrow Collar Man, whose popularity led to him receiving fan mail despite his nonreality, was “the ideal of many contemporary readers” (Dilworth 83). As an example of the masculine ideal, it makes sense that Gatsby seeks to emulate him to woo Daisy. Gatsby understands and emulates the rhetoric of ads. An advertisement functions by convincing a person that by purchasing the product being sold, the buyer can emulate the model in the ad, who always gets the girl. In the case of the Arrow Collar Man, his “appeal as a potential mate is largely that he can afford good clothes and an automobile. . . . Daisy’s voice is, Gatsby and Carraway famously agree, ‘full of money’ (96). That makes her symbolically appropriate as object of the desire of a man who resembles an advertisement largely because, with or without consciously intending to, he imitates one” (Dilworth 88). Gatsby’s performance of his created persona reflects the ways in which his appearance and clothing is a primary means through which he tries to woo Daisy.

Gatsby’s collection of shirts displays his excessive wealth, and when he brings Daisy to his home and shows her his wardrobe, we see ways in which he uses clothing to perform his desired role: a suitable lover for the golden girl. Nick narrates,

[H]e opened for us two hulking patent cabinets which held his massed suits and dressing-gowns and ties, and his shirts, piled like bricks in stacks a dozen high.

‘I’ve got a man in England who buys me clothes. He sends over a selection of things at the beginning of each season, spring and fall.’ He took out a pile of shirts

and began throwing them, one by one, shirts of sheer linen and thick silk and fine flannel, which lost their folds as they fell and covered the table in many-colored disarray. While we admired he brought more and the soft rich heap mounted higher—shirts with stripes and scrolls and plaids in coral and apple-green and lavender and faint orange, with monograms of Indian blue. Suddenly, with a strained sound, Daisy bent her head into the shirts and began to cry stormily. “They’re such beautiful shirts,” she sobbed, her voice muffled in thick folds. “It makes me sad because I’ve never seen such—such beautiful shirts before.”

(Fitzgerald 92)

By showing her his wardrobe, Gatsby conspicuously displays his accumulated wealth, a wealth that enables him to stay in style with endless selections of expensive fabrics which he can carelessly toss to the floor. He shows class distinction through his wardrobe and in the way he acquires it. Building up one’s stores by using a personal shopper a continent away is unattainable for a man without great wealth, and by ensuring Daisy hears this, he subtextually tells her how rich he is. Her reaction is to cry, a reaction that initially seems confusing. Though she frequently speaks insincerely, her tears seem genuine. Perhaps she is crying over the years gone by, and perhaps she is weeping in regret. Turning to scholars lends us interpretive insight to this scene.

Critic Lauren Rule-Maxwell believes this scene is connected to Fitzgerald’s critique of American consumerism. In her article, “The New Emperor’s Clothes: Keatsian Echoes and American Materialism in *The Great Gatsby*,” she argues that “American postures of class and authority ... rely on materialism at the expense of substance. Critiques of this type ... appear throughout Fitzgerald’s work and almost always are

emblemized by gentlemen's clothing, Fitzgerald's symbol for projections of power" (Rule-Maxwell 58). Notably, Gatsby's "consumption patterns follow a British fashion standard as he tries, like Tom, to dress the part of an English gentleman in hopes of making himself more desirable" (Rule-Maxwell 70). He uses clothing to don a costume that will help him to play the part, clad in the raiment of the powerful. By focusing on the ways in which gentlemen's clothing functions as a power-laden symbol, Rule-Maxwell concludes that the depictions of Gatsby's garments condemn "American materialism during the Jazz Age" through a

complicated engagement with materialism because they both celebrate and pass judgment on the way Americans, including Fitzgerald himself, fashioned themselves with cloaks of prosperity ... As visible symbols of clothes making the man, Fitzgerald's detailed representations of modes of dress reflect changing American identities after World War I and contribute to the tragic formulation of a distinctly American Dream that romanticizes both the accumulation of wealth and acts of conquest. (Rule-Maxwell 59)

Rule-Maxwell further argues that instead of creating a new style of clothing to go along with new styles of music, Americans simply "adapted the British imperial model to fit their bigger waistlines" (59). The shirts are part of a heap of an "excess of the goods available for consumption, which curiously, are not consumed" (Rule-Maxwell 70). She notices the sexual tension in the scene that somehow comes through the shirts, noting that many critics view Daisy's reaction "as a representation of the ways in which luxury items operate as objects of eroticized desire" (Rule-Maxwell 70). One even sees her weeping over the shirts as her having "more emotions for Gatsby's possessions than for Gatsby"

(Rule-Maxwell 70). Daisy responds to his wealth, showing that, although ultimately unsuccessful, the path he chose to her heart was not altogether unfounded.

Dilworth provides a second reading of the shirt scene, connecting it to the parallels between Gatsby and the Arrow Collar Man. He writes that Daisy's reaction to the shirts and Gatsby's ownership of them "involve an equal balance of opulent materialism and erotic infatuation, a combination irreducibly astonishing in its effect. The materialist aspect is owing largely to shirts being a measure of wealth. The quality of cloth in a shirt determines cost" (he wears linen, flannel, and silk), and "[t]he erotic aspect of the balance is owing to tactile luxuriance and a shirt's being as intimate as clothing can be without being underwear—and clothing is, after all, an extension of the skin. Daisy's burying her face in Gatsby's shirts is a symbolically intimate act" (Dilworth 86). This intimate act occurs between a symbol of Gatsby's money rather than Gatsby himself. Daisy sees him for who she wants him to be—a romantic figure with whom she can have an affair in proportion to her husband's love affairs. She sees him as an equal to Tom, to whom Gatsby can be compared.

Rule-Maxwell makes the case that despite the differences in Gatsby and Tom's wardrobes, clothing connects them. Fitzgerald uses the word "hulking" to describe Tom as well as the cabinets Gatsby stores his clothing in; Rule-Maxwell notes this connection and hypothesizes that "[i]f Tom as 'a great big hulking physical specimen' represents the sheer size and power of the United States, then Gatsby's 'hulking patent cabinets' suggest America's increased consumption after World War I" (71). For her, clothing is not merely a performative means for Gatsby to get the girl; rather, "[c]lothes function as the central symbol in this commentary to represent the role of objects in the fashioning of

American post-war identity” (71). In addition to demonstrating the shallow, performative nature of post-war consumerism, as the predominant symbol in *The Great Gatsby*, clothing shows the ways in which on a smaller scale humans wear masks to get what they want, disguising the hollowness beneath. Clothing is used by multiple characters in the work as a mask that enables the wearers’ performances, which in turn enable them to get what they want. Fitzgerald is certainly critiquing consumption culture of America and the hollowness of it all; however, through clothing, he also critiques the hollowness and surface-level performance that individual ownership, materialism, and focus on appearance over substance can lead to. Gatsby, like others, wears clothing as a mask, linking him to even his enemy, Tom.

Tom Buchanan is one of the more brutal (but also most wealthy) characters in the novel. When introduced to him, Nick notices his incredibly powerful body that cannot be concealed by “the effeminate swank of his riding clothes”; instead, “he seemed to fill those glistening boots until he strained the top lacing, and you could see a great pack of muscle shifting when his shoulder moved under his thin coat” (7). Tom’s effeminate clothes are a mask that make him appear more civilized; they are a marker of money that attempts to hide his brute nature. He is a violent man who strikes Myrtle and uses his money to consistently bully others; however, his clothes act as a disguise to make him appear civilized.

It is not just the hulking cabinet and demeanor that link Gatsby and Buchanan. Myrtle recalls that when she met Tom, his ‘white shirt-front pressed’ against her arm, a reference which is “colloquially odd” according to Dilworth, who believes “Fitzgerald is going out of his way ... to introduce the word ‘shirt,’” seeming “to align Buchanan, too,

with the Arrow Collar Man” (Dilworth 89). In considering this advertising icon as his role model in style, Gatsby emulates the men of Buchanan’s type. Dilworth notes that while “romantically, Gatsby is more appealing than Buchanan,” he is simply acting the part, using clothing to perform a role that is false and pales in comparison to Buchanan, who is “the real thing” whom Daisy ultimately chooses (Dilworth 90). As Dilworth writes, the wealth and privilege that “belong to the class of which Buchanan is a member” are things that anyone can “aspire” to in an American context because “‘class’ in North America is not an exclusive term” (Dilworth 90). Advertising capitalizes on the possibility of capturing this American Dream, declaring that “since wealth buys privilege, class may be bought” (Dilworth 90). This is what drove Gatsby towards his wealth; however, Buchanan has a distinct advantage in his lineage and inherited wealth. By contrast, Dilworth writes that “Gatsby, whose background is lower class, feels obliged to pretend that the same has been true for him,” even though it is not, showing that “[c]rossing class boundaries is apparently not as easy as advertising promises” (Dilworth 90). Though Gatsby advertises that he is of the same background as Tom, he simply is not.

Furthermore, Dilworth refers to Buchanan and Gatsby as foils with “morally reverse images” (Dilworth 91). Whereas Gatsby is “publicly immoral” in that his actions to make money are technically criminal, Buchanan “is legally innocent but privately immoral” (Dilworth 91). For readers, Gatsby appears more innocent “because there are no personal victims of his criminal activities”; by contrast, Buchanan’s crimes have injured his wife, Myrtle, George, and Gatsby himself (Dilworth 91). Despite all this,

Buchanan still “successfully embodies the American dream”; because of this, Dilworth notes that the

dream itself is therefore flawed by the omission of personal moral responsibility.

Advertising and the commerce it serves are complicit in that omission.

Fitzgerald’s primary critique of the American dream as sustained by modern advertising seems to be that, however enticing, the valuations of wealth, beauty, and erotic fulfillment, without the fundamental values of truth and goodness, are vacuous. (Dilworth 91)

Things that are beautiful on the surface in the novel frequently turn out to be internally rotten or hollow; even the appearance of wealth can be a performative act that disguises moral depravity. Rule-Maxwell believes that through Gatsby’s wealth, Fitzgerald “reveal[s] the ridiculousness of the exorbitance seen in Gatsby’s ‘soft rich heap’ of shirts” (Rule-Maxwell 72). Ultimately, she concludes that these shirts and possessions that are simply kept “as pure representations of excess” eventually “become strictly signs, detached from their utility and material value; they are, in Nick’s words, ‘material without being real’” (Rule-Maxwell 72). These owned objects and garments are performative of wealth that does not exist; or, if it exists, it only lives on the surface.

Gatsby dies in a pool, wearing only a bathing suit. His garments are stripped away, and he dies almost naked. He is stripped of his dream, of his love, and of the clothing that signifies his wealth that was accumulated, ultimately, for nothing. The image of Gatsby, like other characters in the novel, is unable to withstand the fact that his dream is a false image. The ways in which characters use clothing to perform and obtain goals is noteworthy; however, the novel ends with little fulfillment for these

performances. Clothing is performative for these characters; it is not substantive. Daisy and Jordan use it to build blameless, youthful, and goddess-like public images, Myrtle uses it to enact and live out her own fantasies as a woman who wishes to be more like Daisy, and Gatsby uses it in a grandiose attempt to woo and win back Daisy.

Additionally, garments serve to enhance Fitzgerald's critique of consumerism. As Rule-Maxwell writes,

Gatsby made the mistake, however, of valuing his possessions 'according to the measure of response it drew from [Daisy's] well-loved eyes' rather than the good they did him. As a national figure, Gatsby holds up a mirror to Americans, who, blinded by power and desensitized to excess, have lost sight of the irony that they fashion themselves after the very imperial presence that their ancestors idealistically renounced long ago. (72)

In the world of the Jazz Age, wealth, like a costume, disguises the hollow nature of a society consumed by ownership of goods and people. Ten years later, Fitzgerald again used clothing and the fashioning of the body in a performative sense to suggest that even after the Roaring 20s had ended, clothing and performance are poor substitutes for a world governed by the reality of matters instead of the attractive coverings on the surface. As we will see again in *Tender Is the Night*, clothing reflects the context, the author, and the shallowness of characters whose primary god is money.

CHAPTER IV

TENDER IS THE NIGHT AND TENDER IS YOUR SKIN: TANNING AND CRAFTING THE PERFORMATIVE BODY

Eight years after *The Great Gatsby*, F. Scott Fitzgerald again used clothing and fashion in *Tender Is the Night* to heighten the sense of the time period as well as to enhance the ways in which the world, on both sides of the Atlantic, was changing. However, changes on the surface frequently do not reveal a change in underlying motivations for dress. In *Tender Is the Night*, Fitzgerald uses clothing in symbolic ways that allow characters to perform roles to achieve their goals. Through the ways in which bodies are shaped in the novel, Fitzgerald reveals that clothing, shopping, and perfectly bronzed skin have the power to make great economic statements about oneself. Additionally, clothing in *Tender Is the Night*, to a greater degree than *The Great Gatsby*, demonstrates ways in which traditional gender roles and stereotypes were changing during the modernist era. Though many things were changing during the 1920s, characters continued to use their bodies as blank tablets upon which to write and perform statements and roles that can help them achieve goals.

In *Tender Is the Night*, tanning becomes a frequent motif. As the story opens on the French Riviera, Fitzgerald seems to repeatedly mention how tanned the wealthy vacationers are. When Rosemary, a young actress on vacation, initially goes down to the beach, she becomes “conscious of the raw whiteness of her own body” because her lack

of tan indicates her socioeconomic status (5). She has not yet become a member of the social elite, as evidenced by her pallor. She sees on the beach “a group with flesh as white as her own” who, like her, were “obviously less indigenous to the place,” meaning both the beach on the Riviera and the social hemisphere in which the tanned wealthy take their leisure (5). Rosemary, as an actress, has the potential to move between the classes; as with *Gatsby*, visual performances enable her social mobility. Her career fills her entire life with performance, which she achieves through her clothes as well as her craft. To become a part of the socially elite on the Riviera, she plans to tan. Keller notes the first two things Rosemary does: getting sunburned in an attempt to tan and purchasing coconut oil to help her tan better; this leads her to conclude that “[w]hat seems the sign of a ‘natural aristocracy’ on the beach turns out to be a symbol of purchasing power, not intrinsic worth; with the cosmopolitan body, skin itself becomes a fashionable garment, part of a literal form of ‘body-building’ through consumerism” (Keller 140). If we consider, like Keller, the skin as a malleable garment, Fitzgerald’s repeated references to the popular suntan demonstrate the ways in which skin, like clothing, is performative. The ability of the suntan to mark one’s social class is why Rosemary wishes to attain one; however, it is important she takes her time in obtaining this look. After her first day on the beach, she is warned by Dick Diver, an older man with whom she eventually has an affair, not to “get too burned right away” (11). Here, it is interesting that it is dangerous for her to get burned too quickly—it is possible that Fitzgerald is reminding us that to assimilate oneself into this social status unprepared will burn you, and as the novel shows, Dick does eventually get burned. Significantly, he was not born into the elite classes; he cannot brown and instead turns red.

Notably, suntans and even sunburns were fashionable in this period, showing a historical shift between viewing paleness as a measure of wealth to tanned skin as a display of leisure time. Tanning was now a status symbol. In Susan Keller's "The Riviera's Golden Boy: Fitzgerald, Cosmopolitan Tanning, and Racial Commodities in *Tender Is the Night*," Keller writes that the emergence of the leisured suntan "marked a striking new development in the embodiment of class and racial hierarchies, a new social practice that Fitzgerald both meticulously documented and popularized" (130). Keller writes that this practice "constituted an unprecedented change in how the body was conceptualized, a new form of self construction wherein white skin as a symbol of prestige was replaced with darker skin as an index of one's wealth and leisure" (130). Though modernity may struggle to understand how shocking the eminence of the suntan was, Keller notes that it "directly challenged the standard of pale skin celebrated as beauty throughout most of Western history" (134). Tanning completely broke the status quo, but historically, it makes sense that it became popular. As Americans in larger numbers "began to work in factories and offices rather than outside, suntans became less associated with working-class laborers," especially as they "were harder for the average person to acquire, especially in winter" (134). The new fashionable tan "jeopardized racial hierarchies and the systems of privilege centered on visual distinctions in skin color"; it threatened "both traditional beauty and racial hierarchies" (136). Tanning required time as well as wealth to purchase products to enhance and perfect the tan.¹ In this novel, Keller states that tanning is used "to meditate on how the new forms of cosmopolitan self-fashioning imperiled older systems of worth and identity" (130-1).

¹ Keller focuses on racial implications of the tan; see her full article for more information on the ways tanning threatened the racial status quo.

Fitzgerald's writings themselves played a part in remolding the fashionable complexion, "transform[ing] beaches and suntanning from a rare and shocking symbol of the lower classes to an eminently fashionable trend" (Keller 131). Eventually, tanning rules were created to maintain class distinctions. In this time period, the tan demonstrates social class; in *Tender Is the Night*, it also bears a good deal of socioeconomic meaning.

The complexions of Nicole and Dick contrast in a way that reflects their respective economic backgrounds. Nicole is, at the opening of the novel, well-tanned, with brown, bare legs that need not be covered by stockings, and "her brown back hang[s] from her pearls" (Fitzgerald 16). As another sign of wealth, her complexion is almost worn by her jewelry. The money in the Diver family comes from her inheritance, not Dick's success, and if we consider tanning as a symbol of leisure and wealth, we can understand that she fits into the world that he does not quite belong in. Her skin tone also matches her character development. As Keller writes,

[a]fter marrying Diver, Nicole hopes for 'a warm beach where we can be young and brown together' (161), and later, having achieved this dream, her deep tan in the Riviera passages is connected to her description of herself as a 'mean, hard woman' ... Nicole's brown skin matches the attitude of aloof sophistication that she projects while living on the Riviera, a presentation of leisured elegance that takes no effort and needs no instruction. (Keller 148)

In stark contrast to hers, Dick's "complexion was reddish and weatherburned" (Fitzgerald 19). Instead of glowing or being brown or tan, he is ruddy and has a burned look. Perhaps his tan implies that the world of wealth is burning him despite his efforts to belong in a

class where he does not fit. His failed attempts to truly belong in Nicole's world of wealth further demonstrate Fitzgerald's critique of rigid class structures.

In addition to symbolizing wealth, Keller posits that the darkening of skin could signify an increase in sexual liberation and freedom². Most of the sexual freedom in the novel happens in the Riviera, abroad, where a tan is more easily acquired. Keller writes that the "ubiquitous tans at the beginning of the novel indicate that the metaphorical darkening ... has already literally happened and been sexualized much earlier than the close of the book. Tanning affords white characters like Nicole and Diver a way safely to 'try on' a darker sexuality, to 'do' sensuality" in a way that their untanned bodies would not allow (Keller 144). Though this hypothesis is somewhat racially problematic, it is clear that Tommy and Nicole's affair is coded through and by tans. Tommy, her lover, has a very dark tan, and he is written as "hypermasculine but lacking in nobility"; despite his dark complexion, he is "racialized unfavorably throughout the novel," and his tan is "leathery and ugly," which Keller reads as a marker that he, though he tries to perform a social class on the level of Nicole, does not fit in (147). Nicole's tan is described more positively than Tommy's, but it is nonetheless an element of her disguise. During their love affair, her naked body is described as an "oblong white torso joined abruptly to the brown limbs and head," (295). This reveals some the artificiality of her tan—it is in many ways performative. Her appearance does not necessarily reflect what goes on beneath. Even her tan is a carefully cultivated component of her social status. Like in *Gatsby*, we see that characters use their carefully cultivated appearances as elements of their successful—and not so successful—performances.

² Again, see full article for Keller's observations on the problematic racial implications of this phenomenon.

Nicole has money in her heritage; therefore, she belongs to the upper socioeconomic class. Other characters, however, tan partly in pursuit of their social image. The suntan itself can be read as a performative act that allows a person to perform as a member of a social class not their own. Keller notes that by “[c]onforming to the unwritten rules of cosmopolitan style, the Divers display their worth through artful consumption and the rigorous, yet seemingly effortless, construction of their bodies via tanning” (137). The skin itself becomes a performance costume. As Rosemary enters the group, she stands out as uninitiated. The Divers’ perfect tans allow them to look natural on the beach, creating a hierarchy. The tan was intended to clearly demonstrate “one’s class status and to display one’s conspicuous consumption of leisure time, not to destabilize the contemporary concepts of racial classification”; as a code, artfully bronzed skin was a way to show one’s economic status at a glance (Keller 139).³

The skintan, as demonstrated, developed performative aspects. Although it took time to acquire, it could be put on, much like a costume. When considering clothing and costuming as performative in *Tender Is the Night*, it is important to consider Rosemary’s career because she makes a living as an actress. She makes money by performing; therefore, the roles she plays in the novel are highly relevant. Rosemary was not brought up like Nicole, with extra money and her only expectation to marry rich. Although Nicole is a new woman in the sense that she is active, Rosemary fits the mold more in the sense that she works. Rosemary’s mother tells her, “You were brought up to work—not especially to marry. ... whatever happens, it can’t spoil you because economically you’re a boy, not a girl” (40). In many ways, this novel subverts traditional clothing gendered

³ Keller notes that this creates a strange paradox: “white people can *get* a tan, which makes them special, but once they *have* it, they resemble the nonwhites from whom they distinguish themselves” (139). For further exploration of racial implications of the popularized skintan, see her article.

roles and functions. If we consider the old theorem that women tend to dress for sexual attraction while men dress for social class reasons, we can see ways in which clothing enables characters of both sexes and various socioeconomic classes to perform roles that history typically would not have afforded them. In this novel, women use clothing as signs of wealth, whereas men—namely, Dick—use it to attract women. This subversion was also present in *The Great Gatsby*, leading me to believe that Fitzgerald's use of clothing is indicative of a cultural shift in which all people could use clothes to perform however they wish, far less impeded by socioeconomic status and gender. Characters still use clothes to perform, but the way performances are coded and function is more open, reflecting a shift to a culture that has fewer economic and gendered restrictions, both on clothing and on individuals' lives.

Although clothing may have had fewer gendered restrictions during the 1920s, gender performance and roles are central themes in *Tender Is the Night*. When we consider financial status as a component of the stylized and ritualized acts that construct societal treatment of gender, it becomes evident that Nicole's performance as the primary breadwinner in her marriage makes Dick feel emasculated. This is exemplified in microcosm when she makes him a pair of "transparent black lace drawers ... lined with flesh-colored cloth" (21). He puts on this traditionally feminine garment, to the delight of those watching, including Rosemary. Normally, we would see lacy drawers being used by a woman to attract male attention. Here, they serve as a representation of the inverted gender roles in this marriage. Tiffany Joseph, author of "'Non-Combatant's Shell-Shock': Trauma and Gender in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *Tender Is the Night*," argues that trauma in *Tender Is the Night* stems from an inability to meet gendered ideals, with a focus on

Dick's failures and the idea that Dick is matriarchal rather than patriarchal. She posits that "trauma disrupts gender performance and arises from it, exposing the artifice of gender in the postwar world" (Joseph 64). Joseph's focus on gender notes the physical markers caused by the war: "women donned overalls to join the war effort," and "the twenties bore witness to rising hemlines, increasing sexual openness, and voting rights for women" (64). In a world where gender roles had been exposed as societally constructed, many like Dick struggled to reconcile their ideas about gender with reality.

Gender roles were changing intensely, and men struggled to fulfill what it meant to be masculine. Dick is one of these men, and it can be argued that, particularly from an economic perspective, he feels financially emasculated in his relationship with Nicole. According to Nowlin, it is important to note that "masculinity is as much a masquerade as femininity"; furthermore, he posits that "women stand better positioned to exploit this knowledge because by usage they are more practiced in the art of masquerading" (Nowlin par. 26). Dick is unprepared to use this knowledge, which helps lead to his end. Joseph notes that although societal gender changes were occurring, they were "also contested, and traditional ideas of gender did not disappear; rather, these gender ideals frequently surfaced in traumatic ways in an atmosphere of heightened gender anxiety" (66). *Tender Is the Night*, among other works by Fitzgerald, reflect "Fitzgerald's own gender anxieties, especially in response to the avowed masculinity of the high modernists whom he admired. As Frances Kerr writes, 'Asserting masculinity but confessing femininity is a thread that runs through several of Fitzgerald's private declarations'" (qtd. in Joseph 66). Fitzgerald seemed to be fearful for his own masculinity, especially in light of his troublesome relationship with Zelda that was fraught with artistic rivalry.

A brief episode close to the end of *Tender Is the Night* demonstrates these anxieties. Minor characters Mary North and Lady Caroline use cross-dressing to achieve goals, and “dressed in the costume of French sailors” they get into trouble and need Dick to bail them out of jail for the riot they caused by trying to pick up some girls (303). Although Dick uses a connection with a friend named Gousse to get them out, Gousse has a negative reaction to these women, noting that he has respect for many courtesans, but that he has little for these women like he has “never seen before” (306). Joseph writes about his negative reaction to them:

Gousse has no context for understanding Lady Caroline and Mary North; by dressing as men, they have upset his understanding of women, an understanding that can encompass prostitution, but not cross-dressing or homosexuality. This incident in the novel reveals a larger concern over the blurring of sexual and gender identity: how do you account for ‘this sort of women’? Caroline and Mary’s actions are merely exaggerations of a more widespread type of cross-dressing during the era: the masculine lines of some flapper styles as well as the uniforms of military women, factory workers, and nurses. The presence of these ‘uniformed’ women before, during, and after the war could easily aggravate men already fearing the slip of masculine power and authority. ... Dress signals gender, and when dress changes, gender is performed differently. (75)

In the clothing of men, women become confusing to those who are less open-minded. Through this, we can see an example of the push back to the new type of woman in the early twentieth century. A woman so dressed sends unfamiliar signals to men who are unsure whether to perceive them as threats physically or sexually. Therefore, we can

understand Gausse's negative reaction to the incident that goes so far as to include an assertion of masculinity. Joseph writes that his actions demonstrate

both his frustration and confusion, and his desire, perhaps, to 'dominate' the male imposter. Lady Caroline and Mary North, by performing masculinity, not femininity, seem to suggest that gender identity can be donned as easily as a sailor suit, a suggestion that is as unsettling to Gausse as it might be for other men who fear their territory is threatened. Here, for Mary and Caroline, gender and sexuality can be enacted playfully; the world around them, however, is still ill prepared for the ramifications of such gender fluidity and playfulness. (75-6)

Fitzgerald, through this brief episode, provides an instance of the tensions between gender traditions and the modern woman.

An element of gendered performance in *Tender Is the Night* is the focus on the commodification of female youth, an incredibly hot commodity at the time. We can see its value through Rosemary and through Nicole. According to Joseph, the "importance of gender performativity in *Tender Is the Night* is underscored by the overall prevalence of role-playing and performance in the novel that is best characterized by Rosemary who, as a movie actress, represents the socially constructed ideals to which many of the characters aspire" (Joseph 76). When they finally watch Rosemary's film, *Daddy's Girl*, she is described as a "school girl" with "hair down her back and rippling out stiffly," "young and innocent ... embodying all the immaturity of the race," and Rosemary recalls "how she had felt in that dress, especially fresh and new under the fresh young silk" (68-69). On the screen, she represents youth and beauty, the commodities America prized at the time. For a living, Rosemary "masquerades" in costumes, she is used to donning and

performing in various masks and costumes (Joseph 77). Joseph believes that Rosemary “recogniz[es] and us[es] the performative” in order to make “gender less traumatic” (Joseph 77). After all, she openly claims that economically, she is masculine. Both to live and to cope, Rosemary performs.

Nicole’s performance of the feminine is enabled by intense beauty rituals and shopping. As a case study, when she prepares to meet her lover, she goes to great lengths to recapture her sense of youth through cosmetics. She scrutinizes herself, “wondering how soon the fine, slim edifice would begin to sink squat and earthward,” but she acknowledges that the

only physical disparity between Nicole at present and the Nicole of five years before was simply that she was no longer a young girl. But she was enough ridden by the current youth worship, the moving pictures with their myriad faces of girl-children, blandly represented as carrying on the work and wisdom of the world, to feel a jealousy of youth. She put on the first ankle-length day dress that she had owned for many year, and crossed herself reverently with Chanel Sixteen. (290-291)

Notably, the dress she wears that is shorter than the ones in vogue reflects the popular hemlines of her *own* youth. This section demonstrates and reiterates the power of the cult of youth worship, which makes Nicole nervous as she prepares to consummate her relationship with Tommy. Additionally, it shows how powerful the media and film were in beauty. According to Keller, despite this ritual, her transformation of “herself back into the virginal girl she once was” is not successful, even though “neither she nor Barban seem to care” (Keller 148). Their affair is no youthful dalliance; it is mature adultery.

Nicole's socioeconomic background is noteworthy. Her mental illness aside, in her youth she was highly eligible. She is "the granddaughter of a self-made American capitalist and the granddaughter of a Count" (53). Like the Buchanans, she comes from money (although it is not *all* new money). By contrast, "Rosemary was from the middle of the middle class, catapulted by her mother onto the uncharted heights of Hollywood"; she is one of the women who had the success story of an American through the movies (53). Fitzgerald notes that they are similar in that their "point of resemblance to each other and their difference from so many American women, lay in the fact that they were all happy to exist in a man's world—they preserved their individuality through men and not by opposition to them" (53). Nicole and Rosemary are alike because they are different iterations of this "new" type of woman: economically independent and able to function more like men in their world. Nicole is directly connected to ownership, particularly of clothes. Her baggage is excessive, containing a total of eight trunks, hat boxes, a filing cabinet, cases for medicine and a lamp, a phonograph, a typewriter, and materials for picnics and tennis (258). Consumerism and Nicole are linked in ways that shape her relationships with others, particularly her husband and her lover.

When Nicole decides she is in love with Tommy, she places him into a similar category as Dick, and seeing her new lover in her husband's clothing "move[s] her sadly, falsely, as though Tommy were not able to afford such clothes" (278). Nicole as owner of the funds in the relationship likely bought these clothes in the first place, and in an interesting economic reversal, she has dressed her man as well as herself. Her finances give her "money as fins and wings" (280). Nicole's wealth is her method of movement, her guiding power throughout the novel. Nicole's body is beautiful not because it is

beautiful; instead, it is beautiful because it is wealthy. Her wealth and beauty, from the onset, helped her to win a husband. During the courtship section of the novel, Fitzgerald describes her clothing frequently in terms of an angel. Dick is impressed by her “cream-colored dress, alternately blue or gray as they walked, and her very blonde hair,” which is almost a halo that emphasizes her beauty described as “like an angel’s” (135). Keller notes that in Nicole’s youth, she reflects blues and grays and golds, colors meant to “represent a whiteness whiter than white, so fragile and delicate that it relies on external sources to define itself, just as young Nicole looks first to her doctors and then to Diver for guidance on how to live” (148). Later in their youth, when Dick runs into Nicole and she is dating another young man, she is still “lovely to look at” with her “fine-spun hair, bobbed like Irene Castle’s and fluffed into curls,” still retaining a similarity to a halo (*Tender* 148). Even the colors she wears reflect her status as an angel in his mind: “a sweater of powder blue and a white tennis skirt” (*Tender* 148). These angelic, pale colors are noteworthy because her choice to dress in these shades demonstrates an angelic, desirable persona. Additionally, her wearing a skirt for tennis reveals her choice to be an athletic type of new woman. In the opening section of the novel (before the flashback), Nicole has changed: her hair has darkened and she wears red, the opposite of the angelic shades she wore six years ago.

In contrast to Nicole, whose social status was tainted by her mental illness and traumatic incident with her father, Dick does not come from money. His social status and wealth are largely earned through his marriage to Nicole, a reversal of expectations. Despite his “fine clothes, with their fine accessories, he was yet swayed and driven as an animal. Dignity could come only with an overthrowing of his past” (91). He wears these

clothes of dignity to disguise his true past and his lack of financial excess. He is a scholar, a doctor, not a wealthy man. When Nicole and Dick decide to get married, she asks her sister for money just for “clothes and things,” but Dick seems to dislike the fact that she wants him to come into her world of wealth instead of her willingness to settle for his middle-class status. She tells him, “That seems unreasonable, Dick—we have every reason for taking the bigger apartment. Why should we penalize ourselves just because there’s more Warren money than Diver money[?]” (159). Money is clearly an unspoken conflict in their marriage. Dick experiences a tragic fall in part because, according to Keller, he “forgets that cosmopolitan style is a carefully crafted form of identity, the celebration of an artifice so well done that it appears natural,” and when he “comes to mistake this pose for the truth,” his world falls apart (146). Callahan notes that though he tries, Dick cannot “find happiness as curator of the leisure-class expatriate American world he and Nicole create on the Riviera” (384). Dick’s existence in this class is, for the most part, performative. He wants success in his career, and he wants to be loved. Sadly, he does not really obtain either, and his dreams go unfulfilled.

Like Gatsby, Dick initially uses a uniform to appear more eligible and attractive to Nicole. During their courtship, part of Dick’s appeal for Nicole, in addition to his attention, was the uniform which she notes is “so handsome” (121). Later, she notes that the picture she is given of him is “not as handsome as you are in your uniform” (124). Clothing helps him to get the girl, much like it helped Gatsby. Milford notes that Fitzgerald himself “cut a smart figure in his officer’s tunic, impeccably tailored,” and he wore “dashing yellow boots and spurs,” making him noticeable (25). It is likely that he used similar tactics to win Zelda, so perhaps so many of Fitzgerald’s heroes win girls by

wearing a uniform because dressing this way helped him to perform the role that would enable his relationship with his future wife.

Although Nicole seems to be attracted to the masculinity of Dick's uniform, it also appears that something in Nicole responds well to Dick's more feminine qualities. Nowlin reads Nicole's initial response to the uniform as a reading of Dick's masculinity, but he believes "she appreciates the feminine difference in Diver" that enable him to play a more paternal role in her life as "Nicole's psychiatrist, a performance she is quick to detect, as one used to being in the position of the observed" (Nowlin par. 19). Gatsby's military uniform functions similarly to Dick's: a costume that allows them to perform roles that render them suitable mates for the objects of their desire. Here, we see men using clothes for sexual attraction, instead of women. Callahan notes that Diver, like Gatsby, is highly ambitious. It only makes sense that each man would use the tools in their arsenal, including clothing, to help them win the girl. Clothing clearly enables people of all sorts to obtain goals of sexual attraction, and in this period, it is clear that attraction via garments can go both ways. Unfortunately, neither character's performance enacted through uniform leads to a substantial long term and fulfilling relationship.

Another way Fitzgerald incorporates the symbol of clothing in *Tender Is the Night* is through the prevalence of shopping. Rosemary's initiation into the American "in-crowd" on the French Riviera begins through shopping for clothing, accessories, and other objects that will help her perform as a role of the social elite. One of Rosemary's first purchases is a "bottle of cocoanut oil," which she will presumably use to begin faking her own tan (14). After buying this, she admires Nicole, Dick's wife, whose "dress was bright red and her brown legs were bare. She had thick, dark, gold hair like a

chow's" (14). Rosemary's impression of Nicole is noteworthy because, as a girl who aims to seduce her husband, she would hypothetically want to, in some ways, emulate Nicole (similar to Myrtle's performance of clothing a la Daisy in *The Great Gatsby*). In addition to the coconut oil, she keeps buying shoes, including "a pair of espadrilles" (25). Rosemary begins to emulate Nicole's shopping patterns, patterns of excessive consumerism and purchasing. Nicole wears abundant signs of wealth and enjoys buying more of them. She wears an "artificial camellia on her shoulder" and a "lilac scarf that even in the achromatic sunshine cast its color up to her face and down around her moving feet in a lilac shadow" (25). Later, she runs into "Rosemary at the dressmaker's, and shopped with her for artificial flowers and all-colored strings of colored beads on the Rue de Rivoli," and Rosemary feels admiration for "Nicole's method of spending" (97).

During their shopping trips, Nicole functions as a sort of Fairy Godmother type, initiating Rosemary into her world: "With Nicole's help Rosemary bought two dresses and two hats and four pairs of shoes with her money. Nicole bought from a great list that ran two pages, and bought the things in the windows besides. Everything she liked that she couldn't possibly use herself, she bought as a present for a friend" (54). Nicole's method of shopping functions as a conspicuous display of her wealth. Notably, she buys "all these things not a bit like a high-class courtesan buying underwear and jewels, which were after all professional equipment and insurance—but with an entirely different point of view. Nicole was the product of much ingenuity and toil," recipient of a "tithe" that functioned to support "such processes of hers as wholesale buying" (55). As a purchaser, she performs the role life has given her, a role that she seems to, for the most part, enjoy. Nicole's shopping provides another example and enhances Fitzgerald's criticism of

American patterns of consumerism. Furthermore, a comparison of the Divers' respective attitudes towards buying clothing yields insight to their relationship. By contrast with Nicole's method of spending, Dick is embarrassed when he goes to the "shirt-makers where the clerks made a fuss over him out of proportion to the money he spent. Ashamed at promising so much to these poor Englishmen, with his fine manners, his air of having the key to security, ashamed of making a tailor shift an inch of silk on his arm" (104). Dick does not independently have the wealth to purchase these expensive things, and so he performs largely through his actions as he buys his clothes. He, however, is not a good actor like others in the book; therefore, he and his performances eventually crumble.

John Callahan, author of "F. Scott Fitzgerald's Evolving American Dream: The Pursuit of 'Happiness' in *Gatsby*, *Tender Is the Night*, and *The Last Tycoon*," states, "In his life, Fitzgerald, too, had to steel himself against the tendency toward Gatsby's self-destroying romantic obsession, and, like Diver, he had to wrench free from the opposed, complimentary shoals of identification and alienation in his marriage with Zelda" (376). He posits that all three novels are "projections of that sometime struggle between property and the pursuit of happiness" for heroes who seek to "integrate love of a woman with accomplishment in the world" (380). Fitzgerald himself struggled to balance these two things, especially in light of a world he grew to see as increasingly more meaningless. As a stand-in for Fitzgerald, Dick's doom is tied to these critiques. Keller writes that Dick's "decline is given a doomed, heroic quality because he recognizes the crassness of this new system of consumer self-fashioning even as he is unable to extricate himself from it" (Keller 149). Like in *The Great Gatsby*, Fitzgerald's critiques are, ironically, of components of life that he frequently fell prey to. Because his life grew so

performative, the substance underneath turned out to be shallow; likewise, his characters who spend their lives performing for others in disingenuous roles are doomed to grow as jaded as their creator.

When we consider clothing as a form of property, we can see ways in which it enables performances of characters, roles that, when played properly, theoretically could allow them to achieve their true goals. Unfortunately, without substance, many of these dreams are doomed to failure. Likewise, American dreams of ownership, great wealth, great travel, and socioeconomic success frequently turn out to be hollow, particularly in the works of F. Scott Fitzgerald. In both *The Great Gatsby* and in *Tender Is the Night*, he critiques consumerism and demonstrates the hollow nature of performances both on the individual level and on the national level. In the novel, clothing demonstrates symbolically the ways in which societal conceptions and treatment of gender and class were changing; however, a study of its use displays that the underlying motivations for dress by and large remain the same. Even in a changing world, characters use clothing to perform roles that will enable them to succeed.

CHAPTER V

BUILDING A CHARACTER FROM THE CLOTHES UP:

NELLA LARSEN AND *QUICKSAND*

While F. Scott Fitzgerald's novels provide a foundation of American fashion and understanding of it during the 1920s, his perspective reflects a white, male understanding of fashion, a perspective that spent much of the Jazz Age abroad. To round out our view of the period, it is helpful to turn to two African-American women who wrote during the same time period as influential Harlem Renaissance authors: Nella Larsen and Jessie Redmon Fauset. These writers used costume heavily in their novels, often to similar ends as Fitzgerald. Dress has great utility, not just with American expatriates who lived a glamorous lifestyle but also among those who lived in Harlem during the Jazz Age. Garments are useful literary tools in American literature, regardless of the author's lifestyle or location. In Larsen's *Quicksand* (1928), the protagonist, Helga, seems to find solace in clothes but little else. Clothing is the manner through which she can experience luxury as well as dress to appear wealthier and more desirable than she is. Furthermore, Larsen crafts Helga's character almost entirely through her garments.

Helga Crane is a young biracial woman who works for Naxos, a preparatory school, at the outset of the novel. Under the pressures of not fitting in and the pushback to her accusation of their hypocrisy, she quits and begins a path of flight appropriate to her bird-like last name. Ann E. Hostetler notes that *Quicksand* is heavily influenced by Nella Larsen's own background. Like Larsen, "Helga is unable to find a cultural mirror that

corresponds to her image of herself” (Hostetler 36). Tanner, like Hostetler, notes that Larsen draws on her own experiences in the creation of Helga’s biracial background. Larsen was “the child of a white Danish immigrant mother and a black Danish West Indian father who quickly disappeared from her life,” leading to a life for Larsen in which she was forced to spend her youth “as a black girl in an otherwise white family” (Tanner 180). As her first novel, *Quicksand* demonstrates subject matter close to heart for Larsen, and although Tanner cautions readers from “reading *Quicksand* through a strictly autobiographical lens,” she notes that

Larsen’s early felt experiences of spatial practices provide a backdrop for understanding the lived urgency of theoretical issues of race, space, and embodiment in her first novel. Trapped in ‘the corporeal prison’ of hyper-visibility associated with her dark-skinned presence in a white world, the protagonist of *Quicksand* registers the effects of race and space in and through her body. ... *Quicksand* not only defines Helga’s emotions in spatial and bodily terms but traces those emotions to their origin in a series of uncomfortable locations which recall the uninhabitable sites of Larsen’s youth. (Tanner 185)

Laura E. Tanner points out that David Theo Goldberg has said, “Race is embodied, is sourced and sensed through the interactive play and performance of spaces and bodies,” bodies that are necessarily and intentionally dressed (qtd. in Tanner 179). Her article, “Intimate Geography: The Body, Race, and Space in Larsen’s *Quicksand*,” suggests that “[t]ensions of space and embodiment not only shaped Larsen’s most intimate experiences of subjectivity, family, and home, but emerge in her fictional texts as urgent representational concerns” (180). Helga’s inability to feel at home in her own body and

community reflects Larsen's own experiences. Tanner continues by noting the ways in which Larsen was "defined by the color of her skin not just on the urban streets she walked but within the domestic space of a home," which "render[ed] intimate the exclusionary policies" that oppressed her (183). Her body became "not only unprotected but publicly accessible," and, just like Helga's would become, the spaces of her own body were unsafe and hostile (Tanner 183). Like Helga, she was effectively without a true bodily home. Larsen's early life made her conscious of "her own hyper-visibility," a visibility which Helga both experiences and learns to exploit (Tanner 184).

Like Larsen, as a biracial woman Helga finds no place to truly belong, and she sees no faces that represent her own accurately. Interestingly, as Hostetler notes, *Quicksand*'s "emphasis on the visual" leaves out any "clear picture of Helga's face," and even Larsen's descriptions of her present her more like an object than a person (Hostetler 36). Helga constantly flees throughout the novel; she recurrently "finds herself trapped" and "responds with flight, desperately seeking a place where she can live without hypocrisy" (Hostetler 37). She is not an active character, and her level of agency is questionable at best. Hostetler writes that she "reflects and extends her surroundings without changing them in any way" (37). She is created mostly through her clothing as "an aesthetically self-conscious surface, carefully crafted and controlled"; she even tries "not to think" (Hostetler 37). As Tanner points out, "[u]ntil the novel's conclusion, Helga's body, although consistently figured as an object of others' scrutiny, remains oddly inaccessible"; despite its centrality, we see no descriptions of her body, her skin (with a few exceptions), her hair, her face, etc. (Tanner 186). Helga is crafted more or less entirely through her clothes. They are her armor, her security blanket, but also, her

identifiers and the way she crafts who she is. Tanner argues that Helga's body, though "the central site of the novel ... exists primarily at the level of narrative rather than story" (Tanner 186-7). She further writes,

Despite the fact that the novel depicts Helga's defiant tendency to surround herself with vibrant colors and sensuous fabrics as an attempt to resist cultural injunctions of racial and social propriety ... the narrative renders Helga's form as imminently 'conformable'; her body becomes visible only insofar as it consistently assumes the shape of her changing attire. ... Helga's successful ability to meld with her surroundings manifests itself in corporeal intangibility. ... Helga emerges representationally as a placeholder constituted by her physical surroundings and the garments she dons. ... Helga turns to the material world to locate and define her identity; places and objects function to lend form and limit to an otherwise insubstantial body. ... The body that defines her for others offers no clear frame of reference for Helga; without the furnishings she so carefully selects, she has no structure or solidity. ... Helga's self-consciousness about the constructedness of her racial identity translates into her alienation from a lived body she experiences only at a theoretical remove. (187)

Tanner even posits that Helga's body, because it is so constructed, "demands anchoring from the object world" (Tanner 188). Clothing and fashion helps to anchor her as a person. Objects and clothes function as armor as well as anchors. The boundaries of her body are literally drawn and created by clothes. Even Helga's skin is described like "satin cloth," and Tanner notes that the narrative "render[s] her body only in/as the clothes it wears" (Tanner 189). "In *Quicksand*, Helga's lived body is inscribed as an absence rather

than an implied presence; probing beneath her body's construction at the narrative level, the reader finds only a gaping hole" where Helga should be (Tanner 189). Helga is largely constructed by her clothes because without them, she cannot exist.

The theme and motif of clothing in black women's fiction is frequently employed, along with "the frustrated artist" and "the journey" (Hostetler 37). If we consider Helga's obsession with clothing as an act, as a costume, we can reach Hostetler's conclusion, that "Helga's restlessness is triggered by a matter of race disguised as a matter of 'taste'" (Hostetler 37). All of Helga's wanderings serve to emphasize how narrow of a space society has for her. Ultimately, I posit that the reason she cannot stay in one place or be truly happy is because society has only provided two roles for her: that of the subservient, dully dressed lady or the scantily clad, attention-grabbing promiscuous woman.

The daughter of a Danish woman and a Black man, Helga finds herself torn between two worlds, unable to fully fit into either of them; thus she turns to clothing and material things for solace. Helga is described as a "slight girl of twenty-two" at the onset of the novel, sitting in "vivid green and gold negligee and glistening brocaded mules"; she is "attractive" and has "skin like yellow satin" (2). She is pretty, spending her hard-earned money on clothes and nice things that she adores. Even the comparison of her skin to satin and the note that she has brocaded shoes show ways objects bring her comfort. However, Helga does not seem to know what she wants. Larsen writes that other than "a desire for material security, gracious ways of living, a profusion of lovely clothes, and a goodly share of envious admiration, Helga Crane didn't know, couldn't tell" (11). She has transferred feelings and relationships to clothes because she, as an individual with no true place in society, can take some solace in objects.

Helga has an income which she, at Naxos, spent mostly on “clothes,” “books,” and “the furnishings of the room which held her,” objects she had “loved and longed for” all her life; however, it is “this craving, this urge for beauty which had helped to bring her into disfavor in Naxos— ‘pride’ and ‘vanity’ her detractors called it” (6). Helga loves and spends on luxury goods, especially clothing. She has no close family, and she uses objects as security blankets, transferring affection and comfort to these items. Clothes, in a way, function as Helga’s armor. They are also her mask. She dislikes the idea that “there were parts of her she couldn’t be proud of” (7). Therefore, she covers them.

The colors of clothes are often mentioned in *Quicksand*. Hostetler sees *Quicksand* itself as “a meditation on color” (35). She writes that Helga “perceives reality in terms of color,” interpreting light as denoting “fine distinctions of texture, tone, and hue” (35). Hostetler further notes that Helga’s “attention is arrested by details of clothing and textiles, objets d’art, and interior decor,” which is reflected in the narration as “[e]ven nature is described as fabric” (35). Hostetler argues that Larsen’s “emphasis on color advances a thematics of race” (35). Helga Crane herself embodies “the tension between black and white construed as opposites in American culture” because in her case, race is separate “from ethnicity, from community” (Hostetler 35). Her skin excludes her from a familial place in the white world, but her family connections are all white, so she is shunned there as well. Hostetler argues that through “her love of color Helga attempts to create a spectrum rather than an opposition, a palette that will unify her life rather than leave it divided” (35).

At Naxos, this love of color creates tension and drama with other employees, whose “dull attire” she holds in contempt (17). Though other teachers at Naxos wear

navy, black, brown, and small hints of white or tan, Helga longs to wear bright things. Society has told her that “[b]right colors are vulgar” and that “[d]ark complected people shouldn’t wear yellow, or green, or red,” despite the power of those colors to render her even more lovely (17-18). The conflict between her desires and these rules created problems for her.

Clothes had been one of her difficulties in Naxos. Helga Crane loved clothes, elaborate ones. Nevertheless, she had tried not to offend. But with small success, for, although she had affected the deceptively simple variety, the hawk eyes of deans and matrons had detected the subtle difference from their own irreproachably conventional garments. Too, they felt that the colors were queer; dark purples, royal blues, rich greens, deep reds, in soft, luxurious woolens, or heavy, clinging silks. And the trimmings—when Helga used them at all—seemed to them odd. Old laces, strange embroideries, dim brocades. Her faultless, slim shoes made them uncomfortable and her small plain hats seemed to them positively indecent. . . . They existed in constant fear that she might turn out in an evening dress. (18)

Helga grows tired of hearing that her race means she must dress dully. Helga resists and rebels through her sartorial choices, especially in the palettes she chooses for herself. Something inside “told her that bright colours *were* fitting and that dark-complexioned people *should* wear yellow, green, and red. Black, brown, and gray were ruinous to them, actually destroyed the luminous tones lurking in their dusky skins” (18). She obeys her intuition, and this act is one of rebellion as well as self-expression. She does not use clothes to perform this role she is assigned by life and by race; instead, she uses clothing

to break these rules and perform as she thinks life should be. However, as a biracial woman, Helga is only allowed by society to play one of two roles: one of dull subservience, dressed appropriately in non-offensive colors and drab fabrics, or one as a sexy, sensuous promiscuous woman dictated by her race as well as her gender. For Helga, there are no other performative options that will allow her to be well-received by others. Despite her desire to dress as she wishes, society requires that she conform to their casting, not her own.

Helga sees hypocrisy in those who speak of racial pride yet do not live it out, choosing to live lies. Their performances ironically catalyze her own. At Naxos, others speak frequently and “loudly of race, of race consciousness, of race pride,” while they suppress what Helga sees as “its most delightful manifestations, love of color, joy of rhythmic motion, naïve, spontaneous laughter. Harmony, radiance, and simplicity, all the essentials of spiritual beauty in the race they had marked for destruction” (18). The idea of black people performing actions that white people both want them to do and actions that white people irritates Helga. The speaker at Naxos who upsets Helga declares that “if all Negroes would only take a leaf out of the book of Naxos and conduct themselves in the manner of the Naxos products, there would be no race problem, because Naxos Negroes knew what was expected of them. ... They knew enough to stay in their places” (Larsen 3). Naxos is praised for acting and worshipping the white, for performing as second-class whites while staying submissive. This angers Helga. She blames the system that “ruthlessly cut[s] all to a pattern, the white man’s pattern” (4). Helga knows there is a race problem, and staying silent is impossible for her, so she leaves.

Helga learns from her experiences at Naxos that to succeed in the world she must play by its rules. In Harlem, to search for a job, Helga dresses “carefully, in the plainest garments” she owns: “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). Helga’s choice of outfit for a job search adheres to Naxos ideals. The colors are not flashy, and though the fabrics are fine and expensive, showing her earnings, she aims to look smart and employable, not beautiful or sexy. She uses clothes performatively here with the goal of getting a job; however, she also surrenders to the ideals she wanted to rebel against. She is largely unsuccessful in getting a job for a while, which reminds us that she is restricted to playing one of two roles. Working as a secretary in the city is a challenge for her because the job is outside the limits placed upon her. She may perform the role of service dressed drably, but society will not help her to easily perform the role of smart young woman, whether she is dressed smartly or not.

Later, when Helga befriends Anne, she experiences a similar problem to the one at Naxos. One part of her race (remember, she is half Danish) is rejected while the other part is praised and emulated. Despite Anne’s avowed hatred for white people, she dons their clothing and mannerisms, “ap[ing] their clothes, their manners, and their gracious ways of living” (48). This irritates Helga, who sees the hypocrisy therein. Additionally, she is half white and feels some of Anne’s hatred directed at her. Although in theory Anne stands “for the immediate advancement of all things Negroid” while “revolt[ing] against social inequality,” her lifestyle does not fit with her beliefs (49). Clothes, for Anne, are a part of the way in which conforms; they are an avenue through which she

unwittingly helps perpetuate a system of injustice. Anne's attitude leads Helga to believe that black people often speak of embracing their heritage, "but in their hearts they repudiat[e] it," wishing not to "be like themselves" but instead to "be like their white overlords. They were ashamed to be Negroes, but not ashamed to beg for something else" (74-75). Black people used clothing to enhance their play as their white oppressors, just like Anne models her life after white educated elite. Helga is highly critical of hypocrisy. She despises Naxos for its worship of all things white. Hostetler points out that "Naxos is an anagram for 'Saxon' reveals the institutional program: to adopt white values and to create from the multiplicity of black persons a 'machine' of dull conformity" (38). However, Helga's "sense of humor, along with her instinctive gift for detecting hypocrisy," is eventually "sacrificed to her 'religion'" (Hostetler 44). In denying her love for color, clothes, and aesthetic things, Helga "relinquishes a world defined by artifacts of material culture for a world shaped by the biological imperatives of childbearing and physical suffering" (Hostetler 44).

When Helga decides she does not fit in Harlem, she plans to live abroad with her Danish relatives for a while. Helga carefully dresses herself for her last party in Harlem.

Her mind trailed off to the highly important matter of clothes. What should she wear? White? No, everybody would, because it was hot. Green? She shook her head, Anne would be sure to. The blue thing. Reluctantly she decided against it; she loved it, but she had worn it too often. There was that cobwebby black net touched with orange, which she had bought last spring in a fit of extravagance and never worn, because on getting it home both she and Anne had considered it too *décolleté*, and too *outré*. Anne's words: "There's not enough of it, and what there

is gives you the air of something about to fly,” came back to her, and she smiled as she decided that she would certainly wear the black net. For her it would be a symbol. She was about to fly. (Larsen 56)

Her low-cut gown is revealing, rebellious, and provocative. She is ready to fly and openly states that her garment choice acts as a symbol for her. At this last party, Helga’s “experience is one of participation, even of momentary immersion, in the pattern of movement. She is not simply a detached observer ... while she is drawn to the music and the dance, she is also shamed by it” (Hostetler 40). She experiences mixed feelings about it all because she feels torn between her halves. In addition to her two heritages warring between her, she must fight the version of the virgin / whore dichotomy, which for her is a servant / prostitute binary, that she is forced to fit herself into.

When Helga first sees Audrey, a scene which many use to interpret Helga as a lesbian, Helga is drawn to her appearance and her clothes: “The extreme *décolleté* of her simple apricot dress showed a skin of unusual color, a delicate, creamy hue, with golden tones” (60). Various readings of this scene are helpful for differing interpretations, but for my interpretive purposes she stares because she sees something of herself in Audrey that she feels afraid to release. This gown, like hers, is extremely low cut. Her skin also reflects a mixed racial background. Audrey functions like a mirror that reflects who Helga would like to be, if she felt free enough to do it. Helga admires her “assurance, the courage, so placidly to ignore racial barriers and give her attention to people” (62). However, her admiration does not lead to true action, and when she returns from the night, she is “alone, a small crumpled thing in a fragile, flying black and gold dress” (62). Her flight is impeded, but she goes to Denmark anyway.

On meeting her aunt in Denmark, Helga experiences a reversal of sorts. Her Aunt Katrina wears colors and dresses neatly, even making Helga “feel herself a little shabbily dressed” (65). In Denmark, Helga gets to wear and own the nice things she has always wanted. Initially, she likes the luxury of her new life, taking to it “as the proverbial duck to water” because all she has ever wanted is “not money, but the things which money could give, leisure, attention, beautiful surroundings” (67). Though Helga is objectified, she gets what she wants, making life palatable for some time. She exchanges her body and its ability to attract attention for a place in society that, as mentioned earlier, is hyper visible. She seems to enjoy the attention, and she certainly enjoys the privileges and luxury that wealth affords her. Though her relatives hope to advance their own status by using her to attract popularity as well as a husband in the famous painter Axel Olsen, the role she is cast in renders her, as Hostetler writes,

unable to escape from the taint of the sensual stereotype leering out from behind the artist’s representation of her features, because she cannot separate her own awakening sexuality from her participation in a cultural ritual that construes black women as sexual objects. Ironically, at the same time that Helga performs as a representative black woman in Denmark, she comes to long for the company of black Americans. From the other side of the Atlantic, her country seems to her a multiracial land to which she belongs. (41)

Helga’s Danish wardrobe creates quite a fuss. Helga begins to dress in a “severely plain blue *crepe* frock” to wear for tea in Copenhagen, but her aunt insists it is too “sober” and requests “something lively, something bright” because Helga is “young,” “a foreigner, and different,” a girl who “must have bright things to set off the color of [her]

lovely brown skin. Striking things, exotic things,” so that she can “make an impression” (68). Her aunt chooses a black dress with “cerise and purple trimmings” despite Helga’s protestations that it is “too gay” for tea, because Helga must stand out (68). Marie cuts down Helga’s “favorite emerald-green velvet dress a little lower in the back and add some gold and mauve flowers, ‘to liven it up a bit’” (68). Aunt Katrina approves of her “black and orange thing” that is nonetheless cut too high (69). This is likely the “flight” dress, which Helga believed was far too low cut for a Harlem nightclub. Helga’s modesty does not fit Danish perceptions of a black woman, and her aunt even calls her a “prim American maiden” (69). Although Helga learns her instincts for clothing colors were correct, she is hesitant to fully embrace this new role her relatives have written for her. Though she has always used clothing to perform, she has typically tried to choose her roles herself, whereas now she must play the role of the sexualized black woman. She has her doubts, because though “she love[s] color with a passion that perhaps only Negroes and Gypsies know,” she dislikes having her own personal taste, which she has “a deep faith in,” questioned while she is “bedecked in flaunting flashy things” (69).

Her newly chosen role is an uncomfortable performance for Helga because although she can “perceiv[e] herself as an object of desire, Helga cannot express her own desires” (Hostetler 36). In her introduction to *Quicksand*, Deborah E. McDowell writes that Helga is torn between “black and Scandanavian” in “an extreme duality of hot/cold, dark/light, south/north, resonating with and reflecting the divisions in Helga” (xviii). She is simultaneously full of passion and frigid, and the two cancel each other out. She is unable to reconcile her sexuality and actual with either of the roles society will allow her to play because of this duality. Therefore, clothing becomes a coping and functioning

mechanism for her. Hostetler argues that her “fascination with colors and surfaces, with adorning her body and with being looked at, registers the sensuality that she attempts to deny, to disguise” (Hostetler 36). Not only do her clothes function as armor and as a mask, but they also provide her with outlets for both desire and creativity. She suppresses her own sexuality and desires for others, but Hostetler notes that in Denmark, these desires are not merely encouraged but forced upon her as she becomes “an isolated exotic” (41). Regarding the garments themselves, Hostetler notes,

The clothing chosen for her by Axel Olsen, the artist, and paid for by Aunt Katrina differs strikingly from the somber yet jewel-rich palette selected by her own discerning eye at Naxos ... Yet Helga is also fascinated by the ‘mask’ of the ‘exotic primitive,’ so that she submits to her aunt’s construction of her new identity. ... The display of Helga in Denmark recalls the nineteenth-century European practice of exhibiting black women as a form of social entertainment. (41)

In wearing and performing in these luxurious costumes, Helga begins to feel “like a veritable savage” not merely because of the excessive purchasing but also because of “the many pedestrians who stopped to stare at the queer dark creature, strange to their city” (69). Her body is displayed for attention: the green velvet dress is cut down until it is “practically nothing but a skirt,” she is bedecked in “barbaric bracelets,” “dangling earrings,” rouge, and beads (70). Compared to other women at social gatherings, no one else is “so greatly exposed,” and at first she enjoys “the small murmur of wonder and admiration,” the “compliments in the men’s eyes as they bent over her hand,” and “the subtle half-understood flattery of her dinner partners. The women too were kind, feeling

no need for jealousy. ... she was attractive, unusual, in an exotic, almost savage way, but she wasn't one of them. She didn't at all count" (70). The construction of her body in these chapters is achieved through clothing that paints her as a primarily sexual being. In Denmark, Helga's role is that of the sexualized promiscuous black woman. Helga's aunt and uncle dress her in a costume to attract the attention befitting this persona. Helga is put on display. Being noticed is foreign to her at first, but she seems to like it somewhat because of the goods that come with it; however, she eventually finds in Denmark she is not only an oddity to-be-looked-at but also perceived as a purely sensual being. Even clothes can't help her truly fit in: "Here she was, a curiosity, a stunt, at which people came and gazed" (71).

One of these gazers is Herr Olsen, an artist who paints and eventually offers to marry her just because he wants to sleep with her, who notably wears "a great back cape," his theatricality casting him as a foil for Helga's own dramatic garments (71). She dresses dramatically partly because she likes it, partly to get attention, and partly in her quest for some sort of elusive satisfaction, but she learns these costumes also force her to perform another of the roles society is willing her to play. Her aunt says her popularity is because she is different, and Helga ponders whether or not she likes this "stress[ing]" of the difference (72). After rejecting Herr Olsen's proposal (first to be a mistress, then a wife), he rudely responds, telling her she has "the warm impulsive nature of the women of Africa" but the "soul of a prostitute" who sells herself "to the highest buyer," which he claims to be (87). She rejects him, insisting that she is not for sale "to any white man. I don't at all care to be owned. Even by you" (87). This is what sends her back to her

former role in the United States, where, sadly, this is what does eventually happen; she becomes owned by the preacher she weds.

In Denmark, Helga functions in a highly decorative way. Historically, this is a pretty traditional way to look at women, particularly when we take some of the social functions of clothing into consideration. She first realizes this when they take a shopping trip in Copenhagen. The day “convey[s] to Helga her exact status in her new environment. A decoration. A curio. A peacock” (73). Her new wardrobe, initially distasteful to her, consists of a “fantastic collection of garments,” including

batik dresses in which mingled indigo, orange, green, vermilion, and black; dresses of velvet and chiffon in screaming colors, blood-red, sulphur-yellow, sea-green; and one black and white thing in striking combination ... a black Manila shawl strewn with great scarlet and lemon flowers, a leopard-skin coat, a glittering opera-cape ... turban-like hats of metallic silks, feathers and furs, strange jewelry, enameled or set with odd semi-precious stones, a nauseous Eastern perfume, shoes with dangerously high heels. (74)

These fabrics and the colors they are in reflect the immense amount of money spent on these garments and trimmings. Adorning her so expensively functions to get attention. The “unusual pleasure of having so many new and expensive clothes at one time” outweighs her anxiety and misgivings, and she becomes “incited to make an impression, a voluptuous impression” that she is “dressed for” (74). Helga enjoys embracing her gaudily clothed appearance, especially at first. But this eventually grows pale, especially in light of an American performance that reminds her of her other roots.

At a performance, Helga sees two Black American men performing a traditional song and dance, and their stage act does not impress or delight her. Instead, she feels “a fierce hatred for the cavorting Negroes on the stage,” and she feels betrayal, “as if these pale pink and white people among whom she lived had suddenly been invited to look upon something in her which she had hidden away and wanted to forget” (83). Their performance is as compelling as her own, and Helga does not seem to like seeing the mirror they create for her. Like Audrey, they show her a side of her performative nature that she does not want to admit. They build a spectacle that is looked at. She soon feels the need to return home, feeling homesick, “not for America, but for Negroes,” because she finally understands her runaway father’s “need for the inexhaustible humor and the incessant hope of all his own kind, his need for those things, not material, indigenous to all Negro environments” (92). Helga sees the black minstrels performing connecting them “with her own position in Danish society as an object to be admired, a living performance, and she returns to see them again and again. Yet, by expressing Helga’s longing for a connection with black culture through a minstrel show—a form of entertainment created by white Americans to imitate black culture—the text underscores her distance from black culture, even as it highlights the ways in which whites have shaped the cultural lens through which blacks perceive themselves” (Hostetler 42).

Upon her return to America, Helga becomes “more than ever popular at parties” because her “courageous clothes” and “deliberate lure,” tools she used in Denmark, also work in New York so she can “expect and accept admiration as her due” (98). Helga uses clothes to be noticed, to perform not only as coping emotionally and socially, but also as a type of socialite. Objects, clothing specifically, are a coping mechanism and a security

blanket for her, but they also disguise her wandering spirit by putting up a front that appears as if she is intact emotionally and relationally. Internally, however, things are actually quite bad. She goes out to meet a prospective lover dressed in a “little shining, rose-colored slip of a frock knotted with a silver cord” (99). In this outfit, she plans to succumb to her own desires and sate them. She finally wants to embrace aspects of the second role society will allow her to play, that of the woman who is in touch with her sexuality. When she gets rejected, she returns to the first role instead of breaking free of the system entirely, rendering her a tragic figure. Unable to find herself held in the arms of Anderson, she finds herself seeking solace in another place entirely—a church.

Clad in this unsheltering garment, she goes out into the rainy streets, wandering and dressed inappropriately. Quickly, her “foolish little satin shoes” grow “sopping wet,” and a “gust of wind rip[s] the small hat from her head” (110). Her clothes are not as protective of an armor as she would like to think, and though they have made her strong and carried them to this point, they can no longer help her. Her ruined costume signifies a ruined performance. She is stripped of accessories and dignity. In the church she stumbles into, Helga is further stripped. Someone grabs her coat in a moment of religious frenzy, and she “wriggl[es] out of the wet coat,” and the man around her sways, presumably at the sight of her skin in a “clinging red dress” (112). Her appearance prompts a woman to proclaim, “A scarlet ‘oman. Come to Jesus, you pore los’ Jezebel!” (112). Though she is not guilty of the sins implied by congregation members, she is literally wearing red, a color she know she looks good in, and only in the church and conversion scene does “red take on the traditional Christian symbolism of sinfulness,” and “Helga gives in, not to passion, but finally to this construction of herself as scarlet

woman, in order to be at 'home,' immersed in a sense of belonging that is an utter betrayal of her personality. In Larsen's view, to succumb to a preexisting paradigm means to accept one pattern, one stereotype, at the expense of growth or change, cutting oneself off from identity as process and dialogue" (Hostetler 43-4). The congregation's rituals are charismatic, and their "performance [takes] on an almost Bacchic vehemence" (113). The orgasmic religious frenzy is another transference, perhaps one of pagan religiosity imposed onto white man's faith. This could explain why Helga feels "an echo of the weird orgy resound in her own heart" (113). Helga realizes, "all I've ever had in life has been things—except just this one time. . . . Things, she realized, hadn't been, weren't, enough for her. She'd have to have something else besides" (Larsen 116). She looks for this something else in God and in her husband and sex and in her new life, but she ends up doing what she swore she wouldn't: bringing many babies into a world bound to despise them.

Helga exchanges her former armor of luxurious, flashy clothing for an armor of religion; sadly, faith proves to be unable to withstand all that she is up against as well. She trades her costume of a popular Jezebel for the prudish uniform of a preacher's wife, and though as Green's wife in the South she does attempt to bring some beauty to the small village, she grows far more like the matrons of Naxos than she would like. Essentially, she gets rid of herself, and although at first this seems to be a religious emptying of selfishness, she goes too far and erases her identity because as a mixed person who is only allowed to play one of two restrictive roles, she has no place where she can truly belong, even when she dresses the part. She will stand out or be ostracized, no matter what. Helga marries the Reverend Mr. Pleasant Green, and they move to a

small, rural Alabaman town. There, her intentions to “subdue the cleanly scrubbed ugliness of her own surroundings to soft inoffensive beauty” and to help women with “their clothes, tactfully point out that sunbonnets, no matter how gay, and aprons, no matter how frilly, were not quite the proper things for Sunday church wear” go unheard, and women patronizingly disregard her ideas (119). The people of the town do not think Helga is a good preacher’s wife. No matter, for her body grows dedicated solely to children, who “use her up” (123). Helga grows to have “no time for the pursuit of beauty,” instead only for children (124).

The ending of *Quicksand* has received much criticism and confusion. If Helga is so progressive, why would she turn to safety and religion, ending up in the trap she has always guarded herself against? Tanner interprets and explains the confusing ending of *Quicksand* as an illumination for “the backdrop of ‘external and bodily space’ against which the narrative continually produces Helga’s figure” (180). Tanner’s thesis, with which I agree, stems from the idea that “Helga is locked out of her lived body even as she is trapped in the object body that comes to define her” (180). Because “cultural constructions of race complicate and disrupt the dynamics of embodied subjectivity for the black subject,” Helga’s inability to be accepted on account of her race leads to her incessant flight and inability to maintain deep relationships (181). She becomes a hollow shell, known only by her clothing, so perhaps her union with Green provides her a more human shell within which to reside. For Helga and for Larsen, “race intruded to shape the tangible, sensory, and emotional dimensions of her lived space” (Tanner 184). For Tanner, the whole novel is about “the consequences of its protagonist’s dislocation from body and space” (Tanner 185). For her, the strange ending “emerges as an extension of

tensions of race, space, and embodiment evident throughout the novel” (Tanner 185). She writes,

“Helga’s mixed race background consistently forces her to inhabit a series of liminal spaces, including the space of her own body. ... Helga from an early age denaturalizes her relationship to a culturally scripted body and acknowledges the constructedness of race. Even as it liberates her from the social structures that would oppress her, however, Helga’s performative sensibility alienates her from the embodied experience of her own subjectivity,”

reflecting “her search for a home she never experiences in her family of origin or in her own skin” (Tanner 186). Like with Angela in *Plum Bun*, biraciality seems to teach the characters as well as the readers that much of what we perceive about race is constructed. Her identity is “continually disrupted by the collapse of inner and outer space” (Tanner 186). Because she is constantly “visually accessibl[e],” she is perpetually objectified, which “emphasizes the way that her identity is, in Fanon’s terms, ‘overdetermined from without’” (Tanner 186). Her identity has only two options, and she must choose one or the other if she is to fit in. Helga also dresses loudly, as if to accentuate her visibility. She knows she, as a person, cannot be seen, so perhaps she thinks her body can be seen and heard? Therefore,

Quicksand both highlights Helga’s corporeal accessibility and gradually questions the notion that the reader has seen all of Helga that needs to be seen. Even as it renders her body its focus, capturing the reductive dynamic of visual objectification Fanon describes, *Quicksand* simultaneously uncovers a counternarrative of the experiential body that draws the reader’s attention to the

uncomfortable space—geographic, corporeal, and textual—which Helga occupies in the lived world. (Tanner 185)

Helga is constrained by “cultural constructions of identity which appropriate even the immediacy of her somatic experience within categories of signification” (Tanner 190). In her body, she is disoriented.

Tanner posits that “Helga’s experience of desire can itself be understood in terms of her bodily disorientation. Before the novel’s conclusion, Helga’s inability to inhabit her body as a lived space renders it impossible for her to experience desire in somatic terms” (Tanner 193). Helga cannot live out her desires in corporeal terms. This is why, Tanner believes, she ends up marrying Green, despite his unpleasant physical presence. She reads it as “Helga’s desperate attempt to reclaim the ‘stuff’ of her own materiality in response to what she perceives as Anderson’s ‘direct refusal’ of her bodily offering” (Tanner 194). Her fat, sweaty, gross husband’s body “represents her need to ground herself in a corporeality” (Tanner 194). Tanner sees the conclusion as a “desperate attempt to locate herself in a body that she can inhabit in experiential rather than theoretical terms” (Tanner 194). Helga’s strange actions, according to Tanner, stem from “a need to place herself in a lived body” (194). Despite his repulsive body, Green has an “overwhelming corporeality” in which Helga seeks to find her own embodiment (Tanner 195). “Helga’s failed attempt to find a home in her body after Anderson’s rejection propels her not toward the idealized home she lacks but toward the only space she can imagine herself authorized to inhabit: a sweaty, dirt-rimmed corporeality situated in a ‘naked,’ ‘ugly’ house” (Tanner 197). Tanner writes, “Helga’s attempt to rematerialize herself in the face of that uncertainty reveals the extent to which not only her experience

but her imagination of embodiment is shaped by a culture in which the black subject's body is appropriated by the gaze and 'given back,' as Fanon argues, 'distorted'" (198). Through marrying and physically connecting to Green, Helga could potentially "embody the 'thing' she craves and is, lending the shape of the object to her own 'intangible' form through a sexual union that would implicate her in the fecund materiality of his loathsome presence" (Tanner 198).

Helga is objectified in every way. Their relationship's sensuality is also relevant. After he kisses her, her "dreams are invaded by 'colors'—this time colors not of race but of sexual longing, so denied" (Hostetler 42). Again, Helga finds herself torn between her actual desires and her inability to enact them. This is largely because of her dual nature that cannot be reconciled into a holistic sense of identity. Hostetler believes "coming home to Harlem ends tragically for Helga because she is unable to reconcile her sexual awakening with her developing sense of identity as a black woman" (43). Anderson, for Helga, "seems to represent creative potential as well as danger, to suggest the possibility that she can reconcile her sexuality with her identity as a black American woman," however, his advances and her willingness to reciprocate them finally turn out to be "a false promise based on a false premise" (Hostetler 43). Helga is highly "vulnerable to the construction of her nature as crudely sensual," a construction that, via the clothing chosen for her in Denmark, seems unfair; additionally, this public construction makes her afraid to express her own desires (Hostetler 42). She cannot reconcile her casting into the role of chaste servant or loosely rendered sexual slave; therefore, she gives up. In Hostetler's words, "Whereas she once felt forced by her skin color to embody a cultural concept of race, she now feels physically trapped by her sex. ... Helga's body, which had once

served as a sort of mannequin display in the construction of an identity through clothes, is trapped by the social construction of her biology” (Hostetler 44). Race and gender are equally constraining, and in her own body she is imprisoned.

Like we will see in *Plum Bun*, issues of gender as well as race trap the heroines. Both protagonists face challenges on dual levels: race and sex. Hostetler writes that Helga’s “destiny is shaped as much by her sex as by the problematics of race. The fascination with clothing and color that marks her character is an attempt to construct a female identity, to use her attractiveness as power” (Hostetler 35). Helga’s problems stem from the fact that she herself is a binary. Her two parts make it so that she can kind of fit in either world but so that she cannot truly fit in either one. Her split heritages are the source of much of her grief, and they are the reason she seeks comfort in clothing and refocuses her attentions on performing. Larsen writes that she has a “division of her life into two parts in two lands, into physical freedom in Europe and spiritual freedom in America,” a division that is “unfortunate, inconvenient, expensive” (96). Additionally, both freedoms are hampered by societal insistence that she perform in narrow roles dictated by race and gender. This short-sighted casting is the source of a good deal of her troubles, and Larsen’s reminder of the importance of self-identification still rings true today. A good deal of race, as pointed out by Larsen and authors like Fauset, is constructed. Hostetler argues the novel “makes readers pause and question whether skin color is merely a surface that encases the self or whether surfaces in fact create the self” (36). Though the color of the skin is not easily changed, costume and dress enables wearers to create and build their personas while they manipulate the world around them. Hostetler writes, “Helga’s illusion in the beginning of the novel is that she can create

herself through a careful arrangement and selection of artifacts” (36). Ultimately, this illusion proves false, and Helga is forced into a role that she has no desire to play.

Because society gives her only a narrow liberty within which to dress and act, it is no surprise that her ending is less than happy. *Quicksand* reiterates the importance of freedom for individuals in the choices they make regarding their garments as well as their lives.

CHAPTER VI

THE EMPRESS HAS NEW CLOTHES:

PLUM BUN AND PASSING AS A RUSE

Quicksand is not the only work in which a female Harlem Renaissance author uses clothing intentionally through her protagonist. In Jessie Redmon Fauset's *Plum Bun*, clothing is used not merely to cover nakedness but to create an illusion of belonging to a different race. *Plum Bun*, published in 1929, has often been overlooked because of Fauset's poor critical reception during the time period (Hostetler 37). In contrast with the spirit of the 1920s, "purportedly defined by the modern, urban, sexually active New Woman, Fauset became identified with the older regional women writers, turn-of-the-century novelists of manners, and even popular conservative fiction writers" (Goldsmith 259). Angela, the novel's protagonist, passes for white, concealing her heritage through her lighter skin, her attitude and secrecy, and through her clothing choices. Passing as white makes Angela feel "free to taste life in all its fullness and sweetness, in all its minutest details," all because she can "exercis[e] sufficient courage to employ the unique weapon which an accident of heredity had placed in her grasp she was able to master life" (136-7). Her use of costume helps her attract men, which is the traditional purpose women have had in dressing according to Cunnington and Cunnington—to attract a mate; whereas men, generally speaking, primarily use clothes to appear wealthy. Additionally,

clothing enhances her ability to pass as white⁷. In *Plum Bun*, Fauset explores racial implications of garments; additionally, clothing is very useful for Angela. Clothing, among other things, has the power to inscribe race on Angela's body. Like men traditionally, Angela uses clothes to appear socioeconomically higher than perhaps she is, even though *Plum Bun* concerns itself predominantly with traditionally feminine concerns.

Goldsmith points out that, like in *Quicksand*, *Plum Bun* explores gender as well as race. She views Fauset's works, often identified with those of "women writers who rose to prominence in the late nineteenth century," as a part of this "tradition of gendered representation" (Goldsmith 259-260). *Plum Bun* does, in many ways, resemble a Jane Austen novel with its "multiple minor characters, ever-expanding plotlines, and seemingly throwaway scenes and episodes" that "try to account not only for a range of African American experience but also for a broad range of cultural experiences of women across race and generation" (Goldsmith 261). Goldsmith sees *Plum Bun*'s "three principle representatives of the supposed New Negro generation—passing heroine Angela Murray, her brown-skinned sister Virginia, and Angela's eventual lover, the light-skinned Anthony Cruz—[as] similarly haunted by their maternal legacies, cultural and personal inheritances," placing them in the literary heritage as well as a historical one (261). By understanding these characters as haunted by their ancestry, we can understand better, perhaps, why Angela chooses to pass. Goldsmith argues that "Fauset anchors the problems of her contemporary New Negro Women in the previous generation's gender ideals as well as in the racial ideologies and conflicts with which her characters must

⁷ The concept of "passing" is a frequent motif in Harlem Renaissance literature. It refers to the phenomenon in which a Black American with lighter skin would pretend to be white in order to succeed in a racist world set against their own heritage.

contend” (Goldsmith 262). Angela passes for white “out of both ambition and curiosity,” not solely to conceal her racial background (Goldsmith 260). I agree with Goldsmith; Angela’s ambition and desires for the finer things in life drive her passing. Her taste for luxury draws her to seek marriage with a white man, which she plans to do by attracting one. This she plans to accomplish by dressing the part.

According to Susan Tomlinson in “Vision to Visionary: The New Negro Woman as Cultural Worker in Jessie Redmon Fauset’s *Plum Bun*,” Fauset “merges the New Negro and New Woman phenomena while representing the inherent and external limitations of each movement” (94). Tomlinson, with whom I agree, makes the case that Angela’s “definitions of liberation transcend race but stop at gender” (96). Angela must choose between progression for her race and for her gender, and, ultimately, the only answer that she gets is that to be truly happy, she must be her true self. Just as in *Quicksand*, gender plays an equally large role as race. Women of color face this double-edged sword: they are doubly burdened with the weight of their sex as well as the weight of their race. Susan Tomlinson writes that as a “passing novel,” the work both “implies the color line’s false distinction” and “redefines the terms of its binary” (91). Angela “embraces the codes of white femininity which her New (white) Woman peers are at that moment rejecting”; however, her “deployment of her whiteness passes her from one form of oppression to another” (91).

Tomlinson further believes that as “a feminist, anti-racist project, [*Plum Bun*] explores the intersections of race and gender constructions of Black and white American women. . . . [*Plum Bun*] represents the aims, outcomes, and implications of both movements” as both “Fauset and her text occupy the intersection of the New Negro and

the New Woman” (90). Angela is, according to Tomlinson, a protagonist who embodies both the New Negro and the New Woman movements; however, she notes that Angela cannot embody both simultaneously (90). She is forced to choose whether she will be a progressive woman or a progressive Black person; she cannot be both. She may have some mobility, but it is limited by either her sex or her race, meaning that ultimately, she must choose which will limit her. Tomlinson writes, “Fauset unites the New Negro and the New Woman in a character defined by her inability to recognize two aspects of her identity, two cultural desires, at the same time. . . . Fauset’s novel implies their irreconcilability” (91). Angela learns that “both whiteness and masculinity are external markers of privilege”; like *Quicksand*, the novel shows how constructed societal treatment of race and gender are (Phipps 234). Angela learns from passing that “there is no intrinsic value to whiteness—it is merely an implement that one uses to acquire the things one wants” (Phipps 233). Race is shown, like in *Quicksand*, to be a construct. Her skin is coded, like in *Tender Is the Night*, in a way that, even more significantly, enables her to get what she wants. She uses her complexion as a tool. As the envelope of the body, *Plum Bun* offers further evidence that as the envelope of the body, even the skin has rhetorical meaning. The ending demonstrates that, though Angela may be happy, she has had to learn to work under unjust societal limitations. Angela “reconstructs and strengthens her self-conception as an African American woman by deliberately seeking experiences outside the social parameters of this identity” (Phipps 228). Like others, Angela constructs her identity carefully, both with and against social parameters.

Angela, though not biracial like Helga, experiences the symptoms of being caught in the middle. Her family is Black, but she has inherited her mother’s coloring and

genetics that enable her to pass as white. This betokening of skin color and its implications are the primary theme of the novel. For Angela, this ability is both a gift and a curse. She learns from a very young age

that the good things of life are unevenly distributed; merit is not always rewarded; hard labour does not necessarily entail adequate recompense. Certain fortuitous endowments, great physical beauty, unusual strength, a certain unswerving singleness of mind—gifts bestowed quite blindly and disproportionately by the forces which control life, – these were the qualities which contributed toward a glowing and pleasant existence. (Fauset 12-13)

Angela knows her looks are more important than her work for getting the life she wants. Accordingly, she uses them. Generally in *Plum Bun*, Angela and clothing are mentioned more frequently when she passes as white, when she is attempting to chase goals that are ultimately proved to be hollow. Love only comes to her once she accepts and embraces who she is. In passages with greater reference to garments, Angela tends to be more dissatisfied with her life. Clothing seems to play a more prominent role when Larsen is trying to highlight the shallowness and hypocrisy of Angela's life.

Though Angela's interpretation of her passing with her mother is an incorrect understanding of motivations, she eventually learns that living a lie does not bring her happiness. According to Phipps, "Angela does not believe she will be able to create a more refined and stronger version of femininity if she endures the same struggles as other Black women. Instead, the key is to circumvent these struggles" (Phipps 232). By passing, she avoids dealing with the same problems as them. For Angela, beauty and material objects "are good because experience has shown that they generate positive

consequences and will continue to do so,” and her “adoption of whiteness is a wholly practical endeavor” (Phipps 233). Fauset notes that when Angela and her mother go out, people perceived them as a “quietly modish pair, the well-dressed, assured woman and the refined and no less assured daughter” (18). Their passing is discreet, convincing, and, for the most part, benevolent; however, Angela learns there is a dark side. When she passes for more than an afternoon at tea, her lifestyle eventually leads to heartache, heartbreak, and a necessity for her to embrace her true identity.

Angela’s family background teaches her that “[c]olour or rather the lack of it” is “the one absolute prerequisite to the life of which she was always dreaming” (13). This is taught to her by the culture she lives in that worships whiteness rather than honesty or virtue. Angela is taught not to pass to erase her heritage, but instead to obtain the things which white culture dictates as good and desirable. Though she and her mother, Mattie, can pass as white easily, her father and sister, Virginia, are darker complected and cannot. Angela, unlike Virginia, has “her mother’s creamy complexion” and “soft cloudy, chestnut hair,” components of her appearance which carry her incredibly far in life (14). She goes as far as to consider that “the mere possession of a Black or a white skin” as one of the “fortuitous endowments of the gods” (14). Angela learns “passing” from a young age from her mother, but her mother is benevolent and humorous about it. Her mother uses her coloring as well as her

smile and voice to obtain indulgences which [mean] much to her and which [take] nothing from anyone else. ... it amuse[s] her when by herself to take lunch at an exclusive restaurant ... Mrs. Murray love[s] pretty clothes, she like[s] shops devoted to the service of women; she enjoy[s] being even on the fringe of a

fashionable gathering. A satisfaction almost ecstatic seize[s] her when she [drinks] tea in the midst of modishly gowned women in a stylish tea-room. ... She ha[s] no desire to be one of these people, but she like[s] to look on. (15)

Angela's mother, in passing, simply obtains "the qualities which her heart crave[s], bustle, excitement and fashion"; unfortunately, Angela does not realize "that if the economic status or the racial genius of coloured people had permitted them to run modish hotels or vast and popular department stores her mother would have been there" (17). Angela associates nice things not with wealth, but with white people, associating a causation to the correlation she sees. Angela desires to be one of these people mostly because that identity has the potential to afford her greater material pleasures in life. She does not despise her race; conversely, it is eventually the greatest source of beauty she sees.

An analysis of Mattie, Angela and Virginia's mother, lends insight to the cycle of passing and Angela's adoption of the habit. Goldsmith asserts that Mattie is defined "by her relation to clothes, whether through the production of her own artisanal goods or the preservation of others" through her career (262). During the time period of Mattie's youth, before department stores and ready-to-wear garments, were "likely to employ seamstresses, who were exploited ... Mattie's clients would have made only slightly more money than she, as handmade goods were an important sign of taste even for less affluent women" (Goldsmith 262). Mattie loves nice clothing, but she has history with making a living from it, so she has a very different relationship to clothing than Angela. Notably, Mattie's work as a ladies' maid "has been in a household controlled by the most successful unmarried woman in the novel: an autonomous, sexually self-determining,

woman professional,” and, as Goldsmith argues, when she leaves this job, “Fauset reestablishes a patriarchal order dominated by aspirational African American men: Junius now exerts control over Mattie” (263). However, the privileges of Mattie’s lightness and ability to pass “are qualified and transient at best” because they put her in harm’s way (Goldsmith 264).

Mattie’s behavior is very performative, particularly in her expression of her femininity. She repeatedly performs the stylized acts that Judith Butler would see as components of the construction of her gender. Additionally, through Angela, Fauset “demonstrates how the performative apparatus of gender is reproduced in the next generation” (Goldsmith 264). Fauset continually draws “upon the rhetoric of female performance,” particularly in “her depiction of Mattie’s decline and eventual death” (Goldsmith 264). Mattie and Junius’ is entirely dependent on adherence to and “performance of traditional gender roles” (Goldsmith 264). Goldsmith uses the example of Mattie’s becoming sick to exemplify this, noting that eventually, “both daughters—but Angela in particular—are driven to reproduce the frailty that drew Junius to Mattie’s side” (Goldsmith 265). Passing is somehow associated with the feminine through their gender performances, again, linking and demonstrating the ways in which Black women must deal with the double burden of racism and sexism. Throughout their lives, both Angela and Virginia use and “reenact Mattie’s performance of feminine frailty” as they live alone and as they “forge relationships with men” (Goldsmith 266). Anthony’s relationships with both sisters tie back to Mattie’s performative femininity. Goldsmith notes, “Virginia is hardly as weak as Anthony believes her to be, while Angela needs more support than Anthony is able to acknowledge” (267). There is a racial dimension to

this as Anthony perceives Angela as white and Virginia as Black; however, having seen his own mother's needs for support and protection, he feels obligated to stay with Virginia despite his reciprocated feelings for Angela. Angela learns from her mother to perceive of "women as decorous consumers"; for her, this is womanhood (Tomlinson 91). From this, she learns to craft "an identity based on 'fashionable and idle elegance'" (Tomlinson 91). Angela's identity, crafted through objects and clothing, is problematic for her because it conceals who she really is and forces her to become shallow and selfish in her relationships with others.

From an early age, Angela likes material things. Angela will not leave for church as a young woman until her gloves are mended, and she goes to church not because she likes it, but because she cares "about her appearance and she like[s] the luxuriousness of being 'dressed up' on two successive days" (21). To church, Virginia wears a "little red hat and her mother's cut-over blue coat," and, unlike Angela, she "envie[s] no one the incident of finer clothes or a large home" (22). As teenagers, their personalities already demonstrate their attention to the finer things in life. Virginia is content and simply wants to be like her father, whereas Angela takes after her mother. The first time someone spurns her for discovering her true heritage, she begins "to wonder which [is] the more important, a patent insistence on the fact of colour or an acceptance of the good things of life which could come to you in America if either you were not coloured or the fact of your racial connections was not made known" (46). She subtly learns that what matters is not her race; it is what people perceive it as, demonstrating the constructed nature of the societal treatment of race.

Angela is not called to a career or a family. Even her artistic interests are more of a hobby than a vocation. She wants pleasurable experiences and material things. She does not particularly like her first job teaching, but she notably enjoys the way it enables her to “have pretty clothes and to help with the house” (49). Later, Angela “dresse[s] well, even superlatively” as she attempts to get a job in New York, aided by her passing. However, Angela is “restlessly conscious of a desire for broader horizons” (64). Because she finds value only in material objects and in relationships built without truth, she cannot find true contentment or fulfillment and continues searching. The world of New York is written in terms of clothing. There, Angela sees “throng[s] of young men ... gossiping, laughing, dickering, chaffing, combining the customs of the small town with the astonishing cosmopolitanism of their clothes and manners” (97). Clothing is a sacrifice that Angela notices that Miss Powell, a Black girl in her New York art classes, makes: to go to France to study, she “work[s], save[s], scrape[s], go[es] without pleasures and clothes” (109). The lack of nice clothing stands out to Angela as a sacrifice Miss Powell makes. It is a sacrifice Angela is loathe to make. Ironically, she uses clothes to marry so she can continue attaining these clothes. Phipps notes that Angela’s passing brings pleasure to her life, but the benefits are, for her, “essentially feminine’ sources of enjoyment” (227). Angela does not seek to rebel against the status quo or societal injustice. In some regards, she is a shallow character.

In adulthood, Angela’s Sundays change. No longer a church attender, she likes “to sleep late, get up for a leisurely bath and a meticulous toilet,” then spending time “turn[ing] over her wardrobe, sorting and discarding” and reading about “the week’s forecast of theatres, concerts and exhibits” (65). Angela simply does not see “any sense in

living unless you're going to be happy" (70). She perceives passing as white as the quickest path to the things that will bring her happiness. Notably, at the outset of the novel she has "no high purpose in her life," simply an "ability to depict," an "eye for line and for expression," "a nice feeling for colour," and an "instinct for self-appraisal which taught her that she had much to learn" (13). As an artist, Angela fits into dominant overarching themes of Harlem Renaissance works. Her art figures prominently and places her in Greenwich Village, a hub of bohemian artistry during the 1920s. She works, notably, from this area instead of from Harlem. Like Paris and like Harlem, this artistic center plays an important role in Angela's development.

Though they are in Greenwich, which is often considered an inclusive and progressive artistic hub of New York, the art school, though it accepts Black students, still displays racism and injustice to nonwhite students. Throughout *Plum Bun*, Fauset builds a world that reveals to us the ways racism harmfully pervades words and actions. At school, art students who do not know Angela's race openly "never think of darkies as Americans. . . . I suppose they all mind it awfully" (70). Repeatedly, people close to Angela scorn her when they learn that she is not white. For example, Mr. Shields, her art teacher in Philadelphia, is shocked because "she looks and acts just like a white girl. She dresses in better taste than anybody in the room" (72). From Greenwich, Angela "draws her artistic inspiration from the area associated most specifically with the New Woman," which is a "specifically white but ethnically and socially heterogeneous cultural space" (Tomlinson 92, 94). As a setting, Fauset chose it carefully to point out the hypocrisy in the artistic "acceptance" made possible there. Angela develops a new life philosophy: "it isn't being coloured that makes the difference, it's letting it be known" (78). Her

experiences with rejection and white people demonstrate to Angela not that the racial hegemony is wrong but instead that “all the things which she most wanted were wrapped up with white people. All the good things were theirs. Not, some coldly reasoning instinct within was saying, because they were white. But because for the present they had power and the badge of that power was whiteness” (73). Angela sees their power as more important than truth. She therefore knows that the best way for her to get what she wants is to continually keep her race a secret.

Fauset uses Angela’s friend Paulette as a mirror and reflective lens for readers. Paulette seems masculine through objects: she owns a “man’s shaving mug and brush and a case of razors,” and the meal she provides is “more a meal for a working man than for a woman” who is very feminine in appearance but has an “attitude toward the meal” that is decidedly masculine, contrasting with her “dainty feminine” appearance (104). She even drinks like a man. Through Paulette’s character, Tomlinson writes, “[a]mbition and its means are gendered male, coquettishness and submission female, but Paulette’s proclaimed ability to step outside social constructions and use the devices of both categories to fulfill her individualist desires deessentializes the gender roles through which Angela seeks to reconstruct herself” (95). “Fauset opens her female characters’ dressing tables and medicine chests and usually reveals bath salts and cold creams”; Paulette, by contrast, fills her cabinets with men’s things, some belonging to her and some belonging to her companions (Tomlinson 95).

In some ways, Paulette’s attitude about gender serves as a foil for Fauset’s claims about race. Paulette states,

There is a great deal of the man about me. I've learned that a woman is a fool who lets her femininity [sic] stand in the way of what she wants. I've made a philosophy of it. I see what I want; I use my wiles as a woman to get it, and I employ the qualities of men, tenacity and ruthlessness, to keep it. And when I'm through with it, I throw it away just as they do. Consequently I have no regrets and no encumbrances. (105)

Paulette's embrace of the ways of men mirrors Angela's embrace of the ways of white people. By performing as masculine, Paulette is able to get what she wants, whether that is social status, a lover, or anything else. Even her name is a diminutive form of a man's name: "little Paul." Likewise, Angela's performance as a white woman, despite her insistence that she does not deny her race and merely conceals it, enables her to get what she wants. Later, Paulette laments that men are difficult and stupid; however, she notes the performative nature of her relationships with them, jealous of those women who can give everything without fear of rejection. She says they "are the blessed among women. They ought to get down on their knees every day and thank God for permitting them to be their normal selves and not having to play a game. ... Angéle, think of loving and never, never being able to show it until you're asked for it; think of living a game every hour of your life!" (146). Again, Paulette's words allow Fauset to create a parallel between Angela's problems and women's problems at large. Tomlinson sees Paulette as a "representation of a woman living, even thriving, outside sexual convention but very much within the text's code of acceptability"; however, she can only do so because she does not bear the double burden of race and gender (96).

Another character who leads us to a greater understanding of Angela is Roger, the man that Angela intends to marry. Roger is wealthy, but horribly racist and cruel. Nonetheless, she pursues a relationship with him, and even after she learns of his true nature, she “linger[s] over her dressing” to see him because he is the type of white man with whom, theoretically, a marriage would be advantageous. She dresses to impress him because, as suggested by Cunnington and Cunnington, clothing can be an effective tool for a woman to attract a mate. She makes a meticulous toilet as she anticipates and hopes for a proposal, wearing lipstick and a “flame-colour” dress of “a plain, rather heavy beautiful glowing silk” that “Paulette had induced her to buy” (122). The color should attract attention, and the neckline, which is “high in back and girlishly modest in front,” should give off the impression that Angela should be considered for the position of wife, not mistress. By accessorizing with a “string of good artificial pearls and two heavy silver bracelets,” Angela gives “the effect of a flame herself; intense and opaque at the heart where her dress gleamed and shone, transparent and fragile where her white warm neck and face rose into the tenuous shadow of her hair” (122). Though she finds herself attracted to Anthony in body and mind, she chases after this relationship with Roger because she is driven by ambition and greed for material objects.

Angela again wears the “flame coloured dress” to meet Roger because “it light[s] her up from within ... not only her lovely, fine body but her mind too,” and her “satisfaction with her appearance let[s] loose some inexplicable spring of gaiety and merriment and simplicity so that she seem[s] almost daring” (131). Angela’s use of “daring” here contrasts quite well with what “daring” means for Roger, who simply wants her body. Her daily existence passing is fairly daring in light of the repercussions

of getting caught; however, this exercise in flirtation through clothing makes her feel even bolder than she typically is. Her “daring” appearance tempts him to get her as a mistress, no matter the cost. Angela refuses to see his true motivations and perceives that an engagement could be in their future.

Notably, Angela never takes “an article of dress” as a gift from Roger (147). She is already wearing a mask of race; perhaps she does not wish to allow him and his ideas and definitions of her to dress her any further. Like Helga in *Quicksand*, Angela is relegated to the sphere of the purely sensual Black woman, even when her race is unknown, when she allows Roger to define her identity. Instead of rebuking him and crafting her own sense of self, Angela seeks to change his desires for her, working and paying bills in order to “dress to keep herself dainty and desirable for Roger” (151). Clothing creates a pathway, a means for her to dress above her class so to speak. Additionally, dress helps her pass as a white woman not because races dressed inherently differently, but because by dressing the part, she can perform as a person in the world of Roger. In his world, she thinks an effective performance could secure her a permanent position as a wife. He does not perceive of her as marriageable material, though, mostly because of her lack of social status or family connections.

Though she turns away Roger’s initial request to be a mistress, Angela takes him back, and when he comes, he wears “a grey suit, soft grey hat and blue tie,” prompting Angela to compare him to “the men in the advertising pages of the Saturday Evening Post,” perhaps another allusion to the Arrow Collar Man that Daisy likens to Gatsby (149). She also perceives that “every one of his outer garments, hat, shoes, and suit, had been made to measure,” reiterating just how wealthy Roger is and just how suitable of a

husband, if the criterion is wealth, he could be for Angela (149). Clothing reveals the vast amount of space between them, a space that Angela desires to bridge. Angela continually associates the things of wealth that she wants with Roger and success, and she fantasizes of “a white dress” and an “ermine coat,” even though she has of yet been unwilling to accept articles of dress (214). Angela, like Helga, Gatsby, and Diver, uses clothing for romantic goals, which in turn serve her other desires. She wants both freedom and friends, but to get these she knows she needs “money and influence ... even protection; perhaps it would be better to marry ... a white man. ... If she were to do this, do it suitably, then all that richness, all that fullness of life which she so ardently craved would be doubly hers” (88). Clothes shift from being an object she enjoys to a tool that she intends to help her secure a wealthy husband and the lifestyle that would accompany the match.

Angela hides her race, to the dissolution of her familial relationships, and, when planning to meet her sister at the train station, plans to “wear a veil” to keep the porters from recognizing her (152). She wears “her most unobtrusive clothes, a dark blue suit, a plain white silk shirt, a dark blue, bell-shaped hat—a *cloche*—small and fitting down close over her eyes” with a “modish veil well over the tip of her nose,” all hoping to disguise herself and her affiliation with and relationship to Black people (155-6). She is surprised to see Roger there, and he remarks that she is beautiful despite her plain clothes. Her disguise is not even enough to keep her hidden, and she pretends not to recognize her sister, rupturing their relationship.

When Roger eventually grows tired of Angela, she sees a “vanishing of the last hope of the successful marriage which once she had so greatly craved,” and she

experiences a loss of the “sense of security” the possibility gave her (233). Once they break up, she laments the affect on “her appearance; she beg[ins] to husband her clothes, sadly conscious that she [cannot] tell where others would come from” (234). Her appearance demonstrates her emotional state: she is torn up, partially because the relationship has dissolved, but also because she does not know where her identity places her. Without the hope of the marriage she has been pursuing, she has no idea who she is.

Angela crafts a different sort of beauty in her own body than that which she recognizes in others. When Virginia arrives in New York, Angela is stunned by the beauty of her coloring, thinking she has “never seen any one so pretty and so colourful. Jinny had always shown a preference for high colours; to-day she [is] revelling in them; her slippers [are] high heeled small red mules; a deep green dressing-gown [hangs] gracefully from her slim shoulders and from its open collar flame[s] the rose and gold of her smooth skin” (164). Virginia’s natural coloring is enhanced by the bright colors she chooses to wear, colors Angela seems to eschew for the whitewashed brand of beauty she has been taught to worship. Though Angela passes as white, she finds true beauty in her own sister and in her own race. Her “passing” is not to look beautiful; it is to obtain and achieve specific goals. Angela continually notices this beauty of African Americans in New York. She notes at Van Meier’s speech the presence of “the most advanced coloured Americans, beautifully dressed” (216). She is almost surprised by her attraction to the beauty of Black men and women; this is because she is constantly forced to choose between being considered “beautiful” by the white world or between being true to her heritage and her true conception of beauty. She is not given the option of choosing both. Van Meier calls for “a racial pride” that “enables us to find our own beautiful and

praiseworthy, an intense chauvinism that is content with its own types, that finds completeness within its own group” (218-9). Van Meier’s words demonstrate this division within Angela: she is, as previously stated, forced to choose between being a New Woman and a New Negro. Her ability to embrace the progressive spirit of the 1920s is hindered by her race and by her gender, and any time she is able to push back against the limitations of one, the other prevents her from truly rebelling. Though Angela proves treatment of race is constructed, “she has not accumulated these experiences for a specific sociopolitical cause, but has sought out material pleasures for her own benefit. However, Van Meier’s speech provides a framework through which she can structure and organize her experience, breaking out of a circular pattern of hedonism and materialism” (Phipps 237).

Virginia, by contrast, seems to be thriving in Harlem with her mysterious suitor. She has stopped attending church, instead spending Sundays on “correspondence, her clothes, and to such mysterious rites of beautifying and revitalizing as lay back of her health, blooming, exquisiteness,” she seems to be radiantly in love (254). Though Angela can pass as white and is therefore afforded more privileges, Virginia is noted as being more beautiful, at least from the perspective of her sister. Angela forsakes not only what is unhelpful to her; she casts aside her own beliefs about what is and is not beautiful. Even the actresses in Harlem stand out to Angela as particularly beautiful; she sees them as “radiant birds of paradise with their rich brown skins, their exotic eyes and the gaily colored clothing which an unconscious style had evolved just for them,” but strangely, not for her (327). Angela sees more beauty in the race she pretends not to come from. In this way, she disregards her own beauty. As Angela visits Harlem appearing white, she

“comes to appreciate its cultural familiarity as she gradually incorporates her racial background into her identity” as well as her conception of beauty (Tomlinson 91).

Angela finally embraces her background when she feels called to stand up for another young woman who cannot pass as white but has received the same scholarship as her. Miss Powell’s scholarship to study art in France is revoked because of her color, and Angela goes to see her, finding her surrounded by reporters. Again, Angela sees true beauty in her darkness: “Angela thought she had never seen the girl one half so attractive and exotic. She was wearing a thin silk dress, plainly made but of a flaming red, from which the satin blackness of her neck rose,” and her artistic eye registers her as a “marvellous figure of repose” (342). The clothing that sets off her dark skin beautifully enhances the beauty that Angela is attracted to, the beauty that reflects her heritage and true self. Clothing helps enhance this attractiveness. By contrast, one of the reporters is described as “a rangy young lady wearing an unbecoming grey dress and a peculiarly straight and hideous bob” (343). From Angela’s point of view, that which is truly hers is beautiful, and in this scene she learns to accept who she is. Angela stands up for Miss Powell, relinquishing her own scholarship by revealing her racial background. Angela finally embraces and accepts her heritage and her identity, and it makes her a good deal happier. She reprimands the reporters: “Can’t you see that to my way of thinking it’s a great deal better to be coloured and to miss—oh—scholarships and honors and preferments, than to be the contemptible things which you’ve all shown yourselves to be this morning?” (347). At this, the climax of the book, Angela decides to embrace her race, for better or worse. She has grown tired of passing for anyone. For the last party we see her go to, she “rather sullenly put[s] the last touches to her costume,” and the use of the word

costume is relevant here (377). I believe that Fauset is saying that Angela has grown far too tired of performing for people, and, once she makes this decision and begins to live for herself, Anthony is sent to her, and we presume they live happily ever after.

Notably, in *Plum Bun*, when Angela is being more authentic, clothes are mentioned less; when she is most deeply invested in passing, they are more frequently referenced. For example, when she prepares for her trip in which she plans to pass, she wants from Martha “information about money, clothes, possible tips” (335). All throughout the novel, sartorial matters are mentioned more frequently during times when Angela is being less authentic. This is because clothing, like for other Jazz Age characters, serves predominantly as a mask and a tool for her. She has been taught to worship the white culture, including its raiment, and in conforming to its demands, she falls prey to the problems therein. Instead, she must learn to rebel against this system, accept who she is, and embrace the beauty of her own heritage without feeling the necessity to perform her everyday life. Stripped of the foolish need to perform and pretend, Angela could, hypothetically, embody the New Black Woman. Like in the other novels this thesis explores, clothing takes on the role of costume for Angela, and although she initially sees objects and garments as to-be-acquired symbols of wealth and happiness, she goes through a stage of using them to attract a wealthy husband, and when that fails, she learns the value of relationships and sees the beauty of her heritage. In understanding this beauty, Angela has grown, and though she cannot fully rebel against society, she learns that accepting herself is important.

CHAPTER VII
FINISHING THE HEM:
CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Regardless of time period, clothing plays a large role in our lives as well as in our literature. Garments have the power to make profound rhetorical statements, enabling wearers to rebel against the status quo, conform to societal expectations, or don a costume that enables them to obtain things they want or need. With an understanding of Judith Butler's concept of the performative, we can see ways in which clothing enables wearers not just to perform their gender, although gender performance is one of the many primary rationales for clothing, but also their socioeconomic status and other important markers. During the 1920s, great social changes occurred both in response to World War I and as reactionary response to Victorianism. These changes are heightened and emphasized by period clothing. Through wearing the appropriate (or inappropriate garments), wearers could transgress typical social boundaries, particularly socioeconomic ones, although, as the works explored demonstrate, traversing these boundaries frequently does not prove fulfilling to characters, which is somewhat troubling. Authors on both sides of the Atlantic demonstrate awareness of changing society and changing clothing in their works.

As an expatriate author who pays attention to sartorial details, F. Scott Fitzgerald provides excellent examples of ways in which characters performatively adapt clothing

for specific teloses. Furthermore, Harlem Renaissance authors Nella Larsen and Jessie Redmon Fauset demonstrate a similar awareness of the performative power of clothing in their novels. Clothing has power in the world and in literature, and as a bearer of meaning it is a code that, when interpreted properly, enables people to get what they want.

Additionally, this code is a major societal structure. However, when clothing is merely a costume with a specific target, wearers frequently tend to feel unsatisfied by the ends it achieves. This reiterates the idea that though performative garments are useful and an integral part of life, without substance underneath, they will inevitably ring hollow.

Literature changed along with the world in the post-war era. While the expatriate authors wrote about their fabulous, yet seemingly empty, lifestyles, Harlem Renaissance writers described social challenges for Black Americans. The silhouette changed from one that valued womanliness and maturity to one that valued youth and enabled women to don trousers and accomplish far more physically. Additionally, while gender roles were being pushed through clothing, socioeconomic rules were becoming increasingly less formal, which can be seen in clothing that Americans wore in the period of greater economic prosperity. Icons and designers such as Coco Chanel, Paul Poiret, Zelda Fitzgerald, and the stars of the silver screen all impacted what people wore and, more importantly, why they wore it. Additionally, the 1920s and the postwar era was the first time that America came into its own as not only a global superpower, but also as a fashion superpower, rendering the texts at hand important influences on the readers and wearers of the day.

As we saw with *The Great Gatsby*, clothing is a tool that enables each character to perform a role of his or her choosing. Gatsby uses first his military uniform and later an

arsenal of expensive suits to play a role that will allow him to woo Daisy; Tom uses clothing to conceal his brutish nature with a genteel facade. Daisy and Jordan utilize garments similarly, as disguises that enable their performances as wealthy, innocent, and young women. Even Myrtle, Tom's mistress, uses clothing as she attempts to perform as an ersatz Daisy, fulfilling her romantic and economic fantasies. Ultimately, however, these roles performed are not true to these individuals, and each ends up either dead or disillusioned. Through *The Great Gatsby*, F. Scott Fitzgerald critiques a world in which everything is hollow, including the characters housed inside vibrant and expensive clothing.

Again in *Tender Is the Night*, Fitzgerald uses clothing to demonstrate the ways in which characters create illusions of socioeconomic status. Additionally, the surface of the skin can be considered an envelope that is as constructable as a piece of fabric when we consider Fitzgerald's repeated references to the popular skintan, which had grown to be a status symbol obtainable only by those with leisure time and the money to travel. Racial implications of this are heavy; noteworthy, for Fitzgerald, he again has characters from a lower social class attempting to climb into a higher one through the use of appearance and objects. Furthermore, *Tender Is the Night* uses clothing to demonstrate ways in which gender roles were being subverted during the 1920s, something we saw was a prevalent historical theme in garments.

Attention to authors of the Harlem Renaissance gives a nuanced, broader perspective of the 1920s. Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* presents us with a protagonist whose identity is almost entirely crafted through clothing. Helga's body is not described except in the negative, but the objects she decorates it with are described almost constantly and

in great detail. Clothes allow Helga to craft an identity; however, the identity she builds is forced into a dichotomy in which she is only allowed to play the role of promiscuous whore or the subservient wife. There are no other options for her to craft her own identity or sense of self. Clothing serves as armor, security blanket, and self for Helga; unfortunately, it cannot bear the burden of all of these roles, and *Quicksand* ends sadly, with her unable to fulfill any of her desires.

Jessie Redmon Fauset's *Plum Bun* completes a pairing with Larsen. Angela, who passes for white using her genetics and carefully planned clothing, and for most of the novel, she worships the white culture she conforms to. However, by the end of the book, she learns to resist the whitewashed idea of beauty and accepts and loves her heritage for all that it is. Although she is not allowed to be a progressive woman and a progressive Black American at the same time, Angela does eventually obtain some sort of happiness, which makes her unique among these characters. I posit that this is because she stops performing in her day-to-day life and develops a true identity that enables her life to be rich instead of hollow. In modernism, her happy ending is certainly unique and unexpected, and despite critics who believe her work is too conservative or enmeshed in the 19th century traditions of women's writings, I believe that in part it is because the lessons Angela learns in *Plum Bun* are those of self acceptance and of learning to value relationships over social status.

Especially in the disillusioned context of modernism, it is helpful to understand clothing as well as these novels as performative. This demonstrates the much discussed hollow nature of this society. Clothing, though loaded with layers upon layers of meaning as demonstrated in this thesis, can become a mask which disguises nothingness. If we

consider one of the primary components of modernism to be disenchantment and a sense of ennui at this realization, we can see ways in which even clothing reflects intellectual conclusions of the day. Although other studies have been conducted on clothing and the 1920s, few have used clothing as rhetorical evidence of the same conclusions drawn by authors.

The lens that I have used in this study that considers clothing as a text both in the real world and in literary studies can be helpful and applicable to any time period or piece of literature, whether that means understanding the importance of heraldry and armor in Arthurian literature, the aesthetic significance of silhouette in the Victorian period, or Malvolio's cross-gartered stockings in *Twelfth Night*. Understanding clothing as performative on the personal and societal level reveals deeper meanings regarding characters as well as those who wear and wore clothing in real life. Clothing is coded with socioeconomic and gendered meanings that, when read properly, lend insight to social structures, forces and subversions against them, and various individual rhetorical goals. Sartorial choices are not merely devices used for protection and modesty; they are purposeful and have specific teloses.

Furthermore, although this study has examined examples of garments from the 1920s and writings from the period that mention clothing, I did not explore other aspects of visual rhetoric. For example, there is much to be said about a possible analysis of costuming in the many film adaptations of *The Great Gatsby*. Additionally, various stage plays are texts that enable costumers and directors to use clothing precisely and to specific purposes as they craft a visual representation of the play; therefore, American drama of the period would provide an interesting avenue for further research. As film was

growing ever more popular during the 1920s, film also provides various related research topics. The dramatic arts more openly engage the idea that costuming is an integral part of the text, and exploring theatre and films more deeply is perhaps a project for the future.

Ultimately, what we wear bears great significance. Whether we choose to wear it or are told to, the way we decorate ourselves says a good deal about who we are and about our role in society. Particularly in a society undergoing great changes, like America in the 1920s, the changes in what people wear hold great meaning. This holds even more true when a garment is worn or described in literature; it always bears some sort of meaning. With a greater ability to interpret this meaning, we become enabled as better interpreters of visual and literary texts. As we get dressed each morning, perhaps we can all think more about the implications of the garments we select, and in so doing we can carefully craft images to rebel against those forces which are unjust, to reinforce those which are good, and, ultimately, to wear our art on our sleeves.

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