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Clothing the ‘New
Woman’

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Abstract

‘Clothing the “New Woman”’ will examine the way my understanding of the ‘New Woman’ differs from the conventional view of the New Woman as a political figure, specifically focusing on how the ‘New Woman’ reflects her identity through her clothing. Using Henry James’s *Daisy Miller* and *The Portrait of a Lady* and Edith Wharton’s *The Age of Innocence* and *The House of Mirth*, I will analyse how Daisy Miller, Isabel Archer, Ellen Olenska and Lily Bart’s characters contrast to the traditional understanding of the New Woman, because they are simply trying to have control over their own lives. This idea led to the development of my argument that for many characters being a ‘New Woman’ is not about making a wider political statement, such as arguing for the vote, it is about personal liberation. A key way in which the ‘New Woman’ expresses her individuality and freedom is through her clothing. However, Isabel’s dress conforms to expectations of society, therefore, I will use her as an example to show how the ‘New Woman’ identity is not always fixed and stable.

Chapter One will offer a full definition of my understanding of the ‘New Woman’ examining how Daisy, Isabel, Ellen and Lily embody the ‘New Woman’ ideal. Chapter Two will begin by briefly outlining the social significance of dress in the nineteenth century. It will then go onto analyse the ‘New Woman’s’ clothing in her first appearance in each narrative, looking at how their dress reflects their sense of personal freedom and liberation and how Isabel’s dress contrasts her to the other ‘New Woman’ figures. Chapter Three will continue to examine the ‘New Woman’s’ clothing, focusing on the development of their relationship with clothing as the narratives progress. The conclusion will briefly discuss the endings of each text to analyse what becomes of the ‘New Woman’.

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Introduction

The New Woman has always been a figure of controversy. Even before she was 'named' in 1894 by writer and feminist Sarah Grand, Eliza Lynn Linton's 1868 essay 'The Girl of the Period' demonstrated how she was present in society. There is no singular definition of the New Woman, which creates uncertainty surrounding her identity. The New Woman:

attracted a lot of criticism and sparked debate on both sides of the Atlantic and around the world. Who was she and where did she come from? What did she represent? Would she last? Was she to be celebrated as the agent and sign of progress or reviled as a traitor to the traditional family and by extension her race?¹

The New Woman created many questions about female independence and the position of women in nineteenth-century society and arguably many of these are still left unanswered. The New Woman has been subject to a vast amount of research, with critics such as Sally Ledger, Marion Shaw, Lyssa Randolph and Lyn Pykett, examining the role of the New Woman in the nineteenth century. Ledger addresses some of the uncertainties about the New Woman who 'as a concept was, from its inception, riddled with contradictions. Whilst moral decadence and sexual licence were supposed by some critics to be her hallmarks, elsewhere she figured in discourse as a "mannish", asexual biological "type"'.² Shaw and Randolph reinforce the ambiguous quality of the New Woman because she 'something of a chimera: no-one and every-one, a figure of speech almost, which could be invoked and appropriated to represent what was subversive and modern in female behaviour'.³ Here, Ledger, Shaw and Randolph emphasise the

¹ Martha H. Patterson (ed.), 'Introduction', in *The American New Woman Revisited: A Reader, 1894-1930* (London: Rutgers U.P., 2008), p. 1.

² Sally Ledger, *The New Woman: Fiction and Feminism at the Fin de Siècle* (Manchester: Manchester U.P., 1997), p. 6.

³ Marion Shaw and Lyssa Randolph, *New Woman Writers of the Late Nineteenth Century* (Tavistock: Northcote, 2007), p. 8.

undefinable nature New Woman, while outlining the generic parameters for the New Woman as someone who has transgressed the boundaries of femininity. The elusive quality of the New Woman only increased uncertainty about her because she could not be ‘pinned down’: ‘[a]ll that was certain was that she was dangerous, a threat to the *status quo*’.⁴

According to Linton the ‘ideal of womanhood’ was ‘generous, capable [and] modest’ with an ‘innate purity and dignity of her nature’.⁵ Therefore, the New Woman’s ‘subversive and modern femininity’ made her a problematic figure for late nineteenth-century society because of the challenge she posed to the fixed gender expectations of femininity, resulting in her being viewed as a ‘threat’. There is a general trend amongst New Women critics that she was a figure who actively argued for an increase in the political and social rights for women. Ledger argues that the New Woman was ‘a figure committed to change and to the values of a projected future’.⁶ Victoria Coulson explains that ‘the emergence of that icon of cultural change, the New Woman’, made ‘the discussion of the nature and social role of women became more radical’.⁷ For Shaw and Randolph, the New Woman was ‘a figure to whom the rights and opportunities for women could not be satisfied by marriage or women’s limited educational and employment prospects’ which reinforces the political agenda of the New Woman.⁸ Despite the lack of a singular definition of the New Woman, there is a consistency about the characterisation of her as having an active interest in increasing Women’s Rights. The New Woman was a ‘provocative cultural symbol of independence’ and a

⁴ Ledger, *The New Woman*, p. 11.

⁵ Eliza Lynn Linton, ‘The Girl of the Period’, in *The Girl of the Period and Other Social Essays* (London: Richard Bentley and Sons, 1888), p. 1.

⁶ Ledger, *The New Woman*, p.5.

⁷ Victoria Coulson, *Henry James, Woman and Realism* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 2007), p.2.

⁸ Shaw and Randolph, *New Woman Writers of the Late Nineteenth Century*, p. 3.

‘social and political phenomenon’.⁹ The repetition about the ideas of her being a ‘cultural’, ‘social’ and ‘political’ figure, enforce her as a public figure dedicated to changing the social and political rights of women.

In contrast to the conventional view of the New Woman as a public and political figure, my understanding is that she is a personal figure who possesses an innate sense of individuality and freedom. I will refer to her as the ‘New Woman’ and specifically focus on her as a literary figure. I will analyse Henry James’s *Daisy Miller* and *The Portrait of a Lady* and Edith Wharton’s *The House of Mirth* and *The Age of Innocence*, focusing on how Daisy Miller, Isabel Archer, Lily Bart and Ellen Olenska embody my understanding of the ‘New Woman’ figure. My interpretation of the ‘New Woman’ conforms closely to the critic, Christine Bayles Kortsch’s, argument that the ‘New Woman’ ‘offered a fresh vision of womanhood, she was beautiful, athletic, intelligent, liberated, and above all modern’.¹⁰ The word ‘liberated’ is key to my understanding of the ‘New Woman’, because she is not as restricted by the strict expectations of society to the extent of other female characters in literature. It is important to recognise that these female characters are not nor can ever be ‘fully’ liberated because they are still subject to society’s scrutiny and punished for their transgressions. In contrast to the traditional understanding of the New Woman as a figure who argues for political change, these ‘New Woman’ characters are simply trying to have control over their own lives and the ability to express themselves freely. This idea led to the development of my argument that for many characters being a ‘New Woman’ is not about making a wider political statement, such as arguing for the vote, it is about personal liberation. For women in the nineteenth century, this may have contributed to the increase in

⁹ Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America* (New York: Knopf, 1985), p. 176; Coulson, *Henry James, Woman and Realism*, p.2.

¹⁰ Christine Bayles Kortsch, *Culture in Late Victorian Women’s Fiction: Literacy, Textiles and Activism* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), p.14.

women's rights, but that was not the predominant aim. Therefore it is important to differentiate between the traditional understanding of the New Woman as a political figure and my argument that the 'New Woman' is a personal figure.

I believe the 'New Woman' is characterised by her innate sense of freedom, and a key way she expresses her individuality is through her clothing. Many critics have debated the issue surrounding whether clothing is consciously created in order to portray an identity or whether it is something 'natural' which expresses the self. Judith Butler argues that 'words, acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this *on the surface* of the body'.¹¹ Therefore, our clothing becomes a means to express our 'inner' identity, thus our character, on the 'outer' for others to see.¹² However, in contrast to the belief that clothing becomes a way to reflect our innate characteristics, Butler maintains that our 'words, acts [and] gestures' 'are *performative* in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means'.¹³ Clothing 'performs' a function to express our identity, however for Butler it does not necessary reflect our innate character, but reflect our conformity to society's expectations of gender because 'gender is culturally constructed: hence, gender is neither the casual result of sex nor as seemingly fixed as sex'.¹⁴ Butler sees the oppressive nature in the way that the 'outer' self reflects the 'inner' self because people are dressing in order to conform; however, I believe the 'New Woman' achieves a sense of empowerment from her clothing because it reflects her individuality. My understanding is supported by fashion theorists, such as Valerie Steele and Elizabeth Wilson. Wilson argues that clothing 'communicate[s] more subtly than most objects and

¹¹ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (London: Routledge, 2007), p. 185.

¹² Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 185.

¹³ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 185.

¹⁴ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 8.

commodities, precisely because of that intimate relationship to our bodies and our selves’ and so it is personal to each individual.¹⁵ Steele ‘defines fashion as the creation of the embodied identity [...] The body is the center (*sic*) of fashion and it reflects the individual’s physical, personal and societal identity’.¹⁶ For Steele, the way we ‘fashion’ our bodies reflects our ‘inner’, personal identity. Steele continues that ‘[u]ntil Fashion Theory’s launch 11 years ago the dressed body had suffered from a lack of critical analysis. Increasingly scholars have recognized the cultural significance of self-fashioning’, demonstrating the importance of studying clothing in relation to understanding a person’s character.¹⁷ This is just a selection of responses to the larger ongoing debate surrounding the function of clothing. This dissertation will focus on the view that clothing reflects the innate characteristics of ‘inner’ identity, specifically examining how the ‘New Woman’s’ clothing reflects her intrinsic sense of independence.

Clothing is an integral part in the construction of a character. Assumptions are automatically made about both characters and people based on their appearance. Jean Arnold explains that this is because ‘rather than building an identity over time through consistency of moral actions within a community, an individual can build an amoral, instant identity’.¹⁸ This raises questions about the ambiguity of clothing because as we have seen clothing can be consciously used to create a certain identity, conversely it can be unconsciously used to express someone’s character. However, I am focusing on how clothing reflects aspects of character, while analysing the problematic way in which

¹⁵ Elizabeth Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity* (New Brunswick: Rutgers U. P., 2003), p. vii.

¹⁶ Andrea Banfi, ‘Taom Interviews Valerie Steele: “Fashion is a Way to Discuss Social Change”’, <http://www.theartofmaking.in/taom-interviews-valerie-steele-fashion-way-discuss-social-change/> [accessed 20 September, 2014]

¹⁷ Banfi, ‘Taom Interviews Valerie Steele’, [accessed 20 September, 2014]

¹⁸ Jean Arnold, *Victorian Jewellery, Identity, and the Novel: Prisms of Culture* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), p.40.

assumptions are made about people based upon their clothing. Clair Hughes explains the difficult nature of ‘reading’ someone based upon their clothing because ‘dress, in psychoanalytic terminology, is “over determined”’: that is, it is not possible to give one final explanation, there will always be several possible and different explanations – personal taste, fashionable dictates, unconscious self-images, metaphoric patterns and so forth’.¹⁹ Characters such as May Wellend from *The Age of Innocence* and Pansy Osmond from *The Portrait of a Lady* conform to expectations of dress and Linton’s ‘ideal womanhood’, therefore their clothing allows their ‘instant identity’ to portray how they embody the idealised characteristics of femininity. However, the ‘New Woman’s’ clothing frequently does not conform to expectations of society and so their unique style of dress makes them subject to society’s scrutiny, and results in their characters being misinterpreted.

The notion of clothing and dress in the nineteenth century is complicated because ‘the appearance of a man’s or woman’s clothes was regulated not only by fashion but also by the rules of social etiquette’.²⁰ Therefore, outfits had to conform to social expectations of feminine dress which ‘affected the form of garments, their material, colour and decoration’, while following expectations of dress.²¹ There was a tenuous boundary between clothing, fashion and what was deemed acceptable by society because ‘while an excessive concern with personal appearance and fashion was considered vulgar, a due respect for the rituals of dress was expected’.²² The complicated relationship between ideas of fashion and clothing is emphasised because ‘the fashion industry placed a problematic emphasis on women’s relationship with

¹⁹ Clair Hughes, *Dressed in Fiction* (London: Bloomsbury, 2006), p. 4.

²⁰ Penelope Byrde, *Nineteenth Century Fashion* (London: Butler and Tanner, 1992), wp. 110.

²¹ Byrde, *Nineteenth Century Fashion*, p. 110.

²² Byrde, *Nineteenth Century Fashion*, p. 110.

clothing’, which ‘promoted characteristics such as vanity’.²³ An interest in fashionable clothing was seen to be associated with ‘vanity’, which in turn undermined the traditional expectations of modest femininity. This led to society’s fear about clothing because it implies that a woman’s interest in clothing and fashion would result in the deterioration of femininity and female morality. Consequently, we can see how ‘New Woman’ characters, who dress in fashionable clothing become a source of scrutiny for figures in society. Paradoxically, fashion is culturally defined; however, an interest in fashion detracts from society’s expectations of femininity, which demonstrates how ‘the etiquette of social behaviour and dress acquired a new significance and complexity, becoming a source of constant preoccupation’ in the nineteenth century.²⁴

The novella *Daisy Miller* was featured in *Cornhill Magazine* in June-July 1878 and was first published as a book in 1879. *The Portrait of a Lady* was serialised in 1880-1881 and first published as a book in 1881. *The House of Mirth* was published in 1905 and *The Age of Innocence* was published in 1920. Despite Wharton’s novels being published in the early twentieth century they are both set in the late nineteenth century. The heroines in these narratives embody the ‘New Woman’ ideal, with their characters being reflected in their clothing. Although Isabel’s clothing does conform to expectations of nineteenth-century dress, at the beginning of *The Portrait of a Lady* she is a strong example of the ‘New Woman’ ideal making it imperative to include her. The way in which Isabel’s clothing conforms and her character changes after her marriage makes her an interesting point of contrast to Daisy, Ellen and Lily, which will be briefly mentioned across this dissertation. It is important to note that part of the complexity about a discussion based upon dress is the way the terms used appear to frequently

²³ Rosy Aindow, *Dress and Identity in British Literary Culture, 1870-1914* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), p.55.

²⁴ Byrde, *Nineteenth Century Fashion*, p. 110.

coincide with each other. In order to avoid confusion in constructing this debate I will look at the ideas of dress and fashion in relation to narrative to see what they represent in each text and what they mean for each 'New Woman'.

This dissertation will destabilise the nineteenth-century assumption that the characteristics of 'ideal womanhood' are inherent to all women. I will argue that the 'New Woman' is characterised by her innate sense of freedom and independence, looking at the multi-layered representations of clothing in a selection of James and Wharton's literature to show how dress reflects the 'New Woman's' 'inner' identity and liberation from society. The chapters are arranged so that chapter one continues to develop my understanding of the 'New Woman' explaining that she is not a public figure arguing for Women's Rights, which the New Woman is usually associated with, she is simply embracing her own personal freedom and looking at how Daisy, Isabel, Ellen and Lily reflect the 'New Woman' ideal. Chapters two and three will look at how Daisy, Ellen and Lily's clothing reflects their independence and individuality of character, with chapter two focusing on their first appearances in each narrative and chapter three looking at how the relationship between the 'New Woman' and clothing develops as the texts progress. The inclusion of Isabel will enhance this discussion because she offers a point of contrast to Daisy, Ellen and Lily because her clothing does conform to expectations of dress, therefore chapters two and three will examine the effect of this on her character.

Chapter One – Who is the ‘New Woman’?

The introduction outlined how the New Woman is traditionally associated with political and social change. This chapter will develop my argument that the ‘New Woman’ is a progressive literary figure characterised by her innate sense of independence and freedom. Using Henry James’s *Daisy Miller* and *The Portrait of a Lady* and Edith Wharton’s *The House of Mirth* and *The Age of Innocence* I will analyse how Daisy Miller, Isabel Archer, Lily Bart and Ellen Olenska conform to the ‘New Woman’ ideal. These characters empower themselves by embracing and expressing their own individual identities and independence from society. I will address how each characters ‘New Woman’ identity is personal to her, while still embracing the ‘New Woman’ ethos. Daisy is characterised by her innocence, but she also does not follow social conventions; she acts independently, thus conforming to the ‘New Woman’ ideal. Lily automatically challenges expectations of society because she is unmarried at twenty nine. She embraces her independence and actively manipulates her identity in order to maintain her position in society, which is a source of empowerment for her. Ellen does not conform to expectations of femininity, because she left her unfaithful husband for another man, embracing her sense of independence. After that relationship ended she returned to New York where she failed to ‘blend’ in to society. Isabel shows how ‘New Woman’ traits are by no means fixed because before her marriage to Gilbert Osmond she is characterised by her liberty. Yet after her marriage she becomes an unhappy and submissive wife. All these women are characterised by their sense of freedom and independence, they are not trying to argue for any political or social change as the New Woman is traditionally associated with, they are simply trying to express their own identities.

In *The Portrait of a Lady* James's heroine, Isabel Archer, arrives in England from Albany to take up residence at her aunt and uncle's house. Upon her arrival Lord Warburton questions if she is 'Mrs Touchett's niece – the independent young lady' and so before Isabel has spoken she has been characterised by her independence, which is a key trait of the 'New Woman'.²⁵ Isabel reinforces her independent nature because she is 'very fond of [her] liberty' (p. 20). The narrator explains that '[l]ike the majority of American girls, Isabel had been encouraged to express herself' (p. 56). Critic Vijay Prakash Singh argues that this 'made clear to us that free-spiritedness is a quality that James sees as typically American'.²⁶ The freedom of expression which is characteristic of the 'New Woman' is being defined within an American context; however, I do not believe it is confined to an American trait, but more a quality of the 'New Woman'. In Millicent Bell's book, *Meaning in Henry James*, she explains that 'James makes Isabel's personal watchword "freedom" and also allows her, as a character, as much freedom as he can to struggle against the rigidities and reductions of social and literary formula'.²⁷ It is this sense of social freedom that intrigues other characters making her an enigma: an 'original' (p. 31), a 'rare creature' (p. 44) and a 'highly-valued pleasure' (p. 23). Isabel's freedom and independence are innate qualities, because her character is 'very natural' (p. 45). The use of 'natural' encompasses the way the 'New Woman' acts with a freedom of self-expression because she is empowering herself by not repressing her identity in order to conform to social conventions. However, 'natural people are the most trouble' (p. 45) because their sense of personal freedom means that they do not following the rigid expectations of society. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg believes that the

²⁵ Henry James, *The Portrait of a Lady* (London: Penguin Classics, 2011), p. 14. All further references will be given in the body of the text.

²⁶ Vijay Prakash Singh, 'The Portrait of a Lady: Isabel Archer's American Experience', in *American Fiction in Perspective: Contemporary Essays*, ed. Satish K. Gupta (New Delhi: Atlantic, 1997), p. 26.

²⁷ Millicent Bell, *Meaning in Henry James* (Cambridge: Harvard U. P., 1991), p. 89.

New Woman 'rejected social conventions, especially those imposed on women. These women fought stagnation. They acted on their own'.²⁸ The independence which the New Woman displays echoes that of the 'New Woman', raising awareness of the overlap between the New Woman as a political figure and the 'New Woman' as a personal figure. Smith-Rosenberg's use of active verbs such as 'rejected' and 'fought' suggests that the New Woman made a conscious decision to challenge the customs of society, whereas the 'New Woman' unconsciously challenges society because she is acting 'naturally', meaning that there is no overriding political agenda for the 'New Woman'.

Daisy Miller is also a 'natural' character, which leads her to be subject to society's scrutiny throughout the text. Pat Righelato writes in the introduction to *Daisy Miller* that 'Daisy expresses natural spontaneity', reinforcing how Daisy's actions are 'natural' to her and not carefully constructed like others in society.²⁹ During a walk with Mr Giovanelli, Mrs Walker who reflects the voice of patriarchal society, encouraged Daisy to get into her carriage so she is not being 'reckless' and breaking 'custom'.³⁰ However, Daisy continued to embrace her freedom and walk with Mr Giovanelli. She gave a 'violent laugh' (p. 44) at the idea it was inappropriate to be out unchaperoned simultaneously highlighting the absurdity of the social constraint and her social innocence because she was unaware of how this would be construed by society. Daisy challenges Mrs Walker and Winterbourne: '[i]f this is improper [...] then I am all improper, and you must give me up' (p. 44). Daisy's social innocence meant that she was oblivious to the scandal of walking with a man; however, once made aware she

²⁸ Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America*, p. 176.

²⁹ Pat Righelato (ed.), 'Introduction', in *Daisy Miller*, Henry James, (London: Penguin Classics, 2007), p. xvi.

³⁰ Henry James, *Daisy Miller* (London: Penguin Classics, 2007), p. 43. All further references will be given in the body of the text.

continued to defy social ‘custom’ and to act in the way that is natural to her, thus embracing her ‘New Woman’ identity. Winterbourne argues that Daisy flouts social convention because she is ‘uncultivated’ (p. 56), thus does not know any better. Conversely, Mrs Walker believes Daisy to be ‘naturally indelicate’ (p. 45) suggesting that Daisy’s indiscreet behaviour is innate to her. While natural to Daisy, her behaviour stems from her innocence not from a deliberate wish to challenge society. Righelato argues that ‘[t]he paradox is that [Daisy’s] perspective is at once narrower, more provincial and at the same time freer than those she encounters’.³¹ Daisy’s perspective may be ‘narrow’ in the sense that she does not consider or understand how her actions will be perceived by others, yet this leads her to be ‘freer’ because she acts independent from society and without the need to conform, which reinforces her ‘New Woman’ identity.

Daisy is ‘both central, as the title shows, and virtually deprived of a voice of her own. All characters discuss her and evaluate her behaviour all the time, but the reader is never offered direct access to her consciousness and motives’, which results in confusion about her actions.³² The third person narration of *Daisy Miller* means that ‘[w]e never know Daisy’s inner self’ we only see how her actions are construed by others in society and so ‘[t]he ironic distance between narrator and character positions the reader similarly’.³³ Throughout the text Winterbourne is torn between whether Daisy is innocent or a ‘coquette’ (p. 11). The Oxford English Dictionary defines a coquette as:

A woman (more or less young), who uses arts to gain the admiration and affection of men, merely for the gratification of vanity or from a desire of conquest, and without any intention of responding to the feelings aroused; a woman who habitually trifles with the affections of men; a flirt.

³¹ Righelato (ed.), ‘Introduction’, p. xvi.

³² Donatella Izzo, *Portraying the Lady: Technologies of Gender in the Short Stories of Henry James* (Lincoln: Nebraska U. P., 2001), p. 23.

³³ Righelato (ed.), ‘Introduction’, p. xiii.

The negative tone of this definition mirrors the adverse view of a woman labelled as a 'coquette'. Winterbourne considered it 'possible' that Daisy 'was a coquette; he was sure she had a spirit of her own; but in her bright, sweet, superficial little visage there was no mockery, no irony' (p. 11). James's use of the semi colon in the sentence implies there is connection between a 'coquette' and a woman having a 'spirit of her own' which combined with the Oxford English Dictionary's definition suggests the negative way in which a woman with her own character who does not always conform to expectations of society was perceived. The second semi colon highlights the further confusion in Winterbourne's understanding of Daisy because he could not detect any 'mockery' in her 'bright' and 'sweet' appearance. Her appearance suggests her innocence, which undermines any accusations of her being a manipulative flirt.

The contradictions between how Daisy's behaviour is understood by society and what she means by it are apparent throughout the text. During Daisy's first meeting with Winterbourne she informed him that she had 'a great deal of gentlemen's society' (p. 14), which according to social etiquette is not something that a young, unmarried and unchaperoned woman should have had. Winterbourne had 'never yet heard' a woman 'express herself in just this fashion; never, at least save in cases where to say such things seemed a kind of demonstrative evidence of a certain laxity of deportment' (p.14). Daisy's claim to have spent a lot in 'gentlemen's society' aligns her character with improper behaviour, yet Winterbourne questions if she was a 'designing, an audacious, an unscrupulous young person?' (p. 14). Daisy's 'charming' and 'sociable' (p. 14) character, combined with her 'extremely innocent' (p. 14) appearance, suggests that she is not a devious woman. Winterbourne concludes after his first meeting that her behaviour was a result of her being 'very unsophisticated' (p. 15), thus unaware of social conventions. However, his opinion of Daisy changes throughout the narrative as

he later questions ‘whether Daisy’s defiance came from the consciousness of innocence or from her being, essentially, a young person of the reckless class’ (p. 50). Daisy’s actions demonstrate how she functions with a lack of regard for the rules of society, emphasising her own sense of personal freedom. It is precisely this freedom which confuses Winterbourne, because he cannot comprehend the reasons for her behaviour because he is a product of society. In contrast to Winterbourne, Daisy’s behaviour is natural to her, thus demonstrating her conformity to the ‘New Woman’ ideal.

May Wellend in *The Age of Innocence* represents the feminine ideal making her ‘the prototype of what a young woman should be in her community’.³⁴ She is the product of New York society who always knows how to do and ‘say the right thing’.³⁵ It is May who marries Newland Archer and offers a stark contrast to ‘New Woman’, Ellen Olenska. At the beginning of the novel Newland’s aim was for May ‘to develop a social tact and readiness of wit enabling her to hold her own with the most popular married women of the “younger set”’ (p. 5). Newland’s aspirations for May are firmly fixed within her social position as a wife within New York society. At first Newland is excited for his ‘new life’ with May who he describes as ‘whiteness, radiance, goodness’ (p. 16). Her ‘whiteness’ suggests her innocence and purity, combined with her ‘radiance’ and ‘goodness’ making her the embodiment of the characteristics of the Angel in the House; the epitome of the nineteenth-century woman. After Newland begins to fall in love with Ellen his opinion of his ‘ideal’ wife changes. He looked at a photograph of May ‘[w]ith a new sense of awe’ seeing that she was a ‘terrifying product of the social system he belonged to and believed in, the young girl who knew nothing and expected everything’ (p. 28). Newland begins to question the society he belongs to

³⁴ Min-Jung Lee, *Interpreting Unhappy Woman in Edith Wharton’s Novels* (Tallahassee: Florida State University, 2008), p. 18.

³⁵ Edith Wharton, *The Age of Innocence* (London: Wordsworth Classics, 1999), p. 16. All further references will be given in the body of the text.

which has rendered his wife to be unintelligent and entitled. The description suggests she is a shell of a person; she conforms to the expectations of society, yet she knows ‘nothing’ and lacks character. Newland becomes ‘discouraged by the thought that all this frankness and innocence were only an artificial product’ because ‘[u]ntrained human nature was not frank and innocent’ (p. 30). Femininity dictates women to be ‘innocent’, yet Newland is arguing that May’s ‘innocence’ is learnt behaviour ‘cunningly manufactured by a conspiracy of mothers and aunts and grandmothers’ (p. 30) in order to emphasise conformity to the feminine ideal. The idea that innocence is constructed undermines the core belief at the heart of nineteenth-century society that the idealised characteristics of womanhood are innate qualities of femininity. Contrary to the conventional view of femininity, Daisy has demonstrated how it is the ‘New Woman’ who is ‘innocent’ because she expresses herself naturally.

Like May, Ellen Olenska was raised in New York society, whereas May stayed in Europe and married a Polish Count. Upon returning to New York, Ellen became a source of gossip during her first social appearance at the Opera about her reasons for leaving Europe. One man questioned ‘just *what* happened’ (p. 10), with the emphasis on ‘*what*’ suggesting the extent of the rumours about Ellen. During the conversation it is revealed that Ellen left her husband, who was ‘an awful brute’ (p. 10) and a womaniser. Upon hearing that Ellen ‘bolted’ with her husband’s ‘secretary’ (p. 11) one man’s ‘face fell’ (p. 10), revealing the extent of the shock at a woman leaving her husband for another man despite him having several affairs. This highlights the injustice of New York society and also demonstrates how Ellen does not follow social conventions; she is acting out of her best interest and not what society expects of her. In society ‘there being a shadow of a shade on poor Ellen Olenska’s reputation’ (p. 17), which suggests the unforgiving nature of society because despite her unfaithful husband

it is Ellen who is left with a tainted reputation. The use of 'poor' alludes to the unfairness of her reputation. However, the repetition of 'poor Ellen' in the novel makes the use of the word appear insincere, suggesting that she is only being referred to as this in order to make others sound like they are showing sympathy for her, when they are actually condemning her.

During one of Newland's visits to see May there was 'general relief' (p. 19) that Ellen was not present, which implies Newland's fear of Ellen and what she stands for. Her absence 'spared them the embarrassment of her presence, and the faint shadow that her unhappy past might seem to shed on their radiant future' (p. 19). The use of 'embarrassment' highlights the extent of society's unease about Ellen's infidelity and the scandal of her divorce. Newland's fears that Ellen's 'past' might taint his future with May foreshadows the future, but that is not because of Ellen's 'corrupting' influence, it is because of his realisation of his love for Ellen. Despite saving Newland and May the 'embarrassment of her presence' in being out during 'shopping hour', Newland still thought it 'seemed an indelicate thing for a compromised woman to do' (p. 19). Here, Newland is reflecting the patriarchal voice of society who believes that Ellen's transgression meant she should not be seen in society. However, Ellen's independence from society is apparent because she does not let social custom confine her. After Newland begins to fall in love with Ellen he challenges society by asking:

Why shouldn't [Ellen] be conspicuous if she chooses? Why should she slink about as if it were she who had disgraced herself? She's "poor Ellen" certainly, because she had the bad luck to make a wretched marriage; but I don't see that that's a reason for hiding her head as if she were the culprit (p. 26).

Here, Newland is questioning why Ellen should be punished because of her 'wretched marriage', exposing the injustice of society's treatment of her. The subject of Ellen's divorce was shocking for society because '[i]n the nineteenth century [...] divorce derived its symbolic punch from its capacity to undermine the contract of marriage, and

marriage was (and is) a metonym for the social order. Divorce thus implicitly rocked the foundations of social order'.³⁶ Newland explains to Ellen that '[o]ur ideas about marriage and divorce are particularly old-fashioned. Our legislation favours divorce—our social customs don't' (p. 71) and so divorce 'was a recourse that upper-class women, in particular, were not supposed to reach for, however outrageous the offenses of their husbands'.³⁷ Newland fears that Ellen 'has exposed herself by [...] unconventional actions to – to offensive insinuations' (p. 71) and as a consequence he asks her 'what should you gain that would compensate for the possibility—the certainty—of a lot of beastly talk?' (p. 71). Here, the fear about society's scrutiny is seen to take precedence over Ellen's ability to divorce her husband, which causes her to ask '[b]ut my freedom—is that nothing?' (p. 72). Ellen's concern is for her 'freedom' which reinforces her 'New Woman' identity while highlighting the tension between embracing her freedom and the consequences it would have for her in society. The conflict between Newland's personal view of Ellen and what society dictates his view should be is apparent when the narrator reveals how '[t]heoretically, the idea of divorce was almost as distasteful to [Newland] as his mother' (p. 60). The use of 'theoretically' suggests that in reality Ellen's divorce should not offend him; however as he is a member of society he has to find any ideas or talk about divorce 'distasteful'.

Ellen had a 'mysterious authority of beauty, a sureness in the carriage of the head, the movement of the eyes, which, without being in the theatrical, stuck him as highly trained and full of a conscious power' (p. 39). Ellen's 'mysterious authority of beauty' is a consequence of the fact that she differs from the other women in society. Newland's understanding that her movement is both 'trained' and 'full of conscious

³⁶ Norma Basch, *Framing American Divorce: From the Revolutionary Generation to the Victorians* (London: California U. P., 2001), p. 3.

³⁷ Bell, *Meaning in Henry James*, p. 88.

power' is interesting. I think her power comes from her confidence and control over her identity. 'At the same time she was simpler in manner than most of the ladies present' (p. 39) because she is true to herself and so she is not manipulating her character in order to comply with society's unwritten rules, just like Daisy also emphasises the social innocence of the 'New Woman'. At the party Ellen broke social convention because it 'was not the custom in New York drawing-rooms for a lady to get up and walk away from one gentleman in order to seek the company of another' (p. 41). The narrator implicitly criticises the custom where a woman 'should wait, immovable as an idol, while the men who wished to converse with her succeeded each other at her side' (p. 41). Women are meant to remain passive and wait for a man, who has agency, to talk to her, yet Ellen 'was apparently unaware of having broken any rule; [and so] she sat at perfect ease' (p. 41). The use of 'apparently' suggests a hint of scepticism as to whether Ellen was really 'unaware'; however, Ellen embraces her freedom and continues to sit down, reinforcing her as a 'New Woman'.

When Ellen is deciding where to live Newland explains that the street she wants to live on is 'not fashionable' (p. 47). Ellen responds: '[f]ashionable! Do you all think so much of that?' (p. 47). Ellen expresses her own lack of interest in keeping up with the 'fashions' in society and is either mocking or surprised by Newland's interest in keeping up appearances. Ellen is suggesting the irrationality of society that it cares about the 'fashionable' status of someone's street. Ellen reinforces her 'New Woman' identity because she questions '[w]hy not make one's own fashions?' (p. 47). Ellen is suggesting that 'fashion' should be personal, insinuating that it is about what one feels more comfortable with, than the understanding that 'fashion' is a socially dictated trend. When Newland states that 'the Van Der Luydens [...] are the most powerful influence in New York society. Unfortunately – owing to her health – they receive very seldom'

(p. 48), Ellen further exposes the ridiculousness of society by questioning if the reason ‘[f]or their great influence [is] that they make themselves so rare’ (p.48). Ellen is implying that when the Van Der Luydens entertain society perceives that it is of importance because it is so infrequent. Ellen then deliberates if she is wrong, but Newland believes that Ellen is ‘opening [his] eyes to things [he had] looked at so long that [he had] ceased to see them’ (p. 48). This critique of society suggests that those inside society do not ‘see’ things anymore because they have been subject to its ways for so long. Ellen provides a fresh insight into society and can see things how they are, she becomes the natural and socially innocent one and those who belong to society are corrupted by the unnatural nature, thus the constructed quality of it. Ellen ‘may simplify too much’ (p. 49) but she wants Newland to ‘warn’ (p. 49) her if she does. Ellen’s ‘simple’ way of viewing society reinforces her social innocence, yet she wants Newland to corrupt her innocent view of society in order to allow her to ‘belong’ to it, without conforming to it.

Lily Bart conforms to the ‘New Woman’ ideal, just like Ellen, Lily tries to belong to society, without having to repress her independence. Lily ‘strives to represent an ideal of womanhood which no longer has any real basis. Her self-fashioning – undertaken in a place and period of apparently increased female freedoms – is fatally misinterpreted by a society whose only ideals are cash-based’.³⁸ Throughout the novel Lily is attempting to secure herself a husband; however in spite of the fact that she ‘might have married more than once – the conventional rich marriage which she had been taught to consider the sole end of existence – [...] when the opportunity came she had always shrunk from it’.³⁹ Lily is an independent women who has had the

³⁸ Hughes, *Dressed in Fiction*, p. 9.

³⁹ Edith Wharton, *The House of Mirth* (Hare: Wordsworth Editions, 2002), p. 137. All further references will be given in the body of the text.

opportunity to marry, thus secure her position in New York society, yet she has turned the marriage proposals down in order to pursue her own freedom and liberty to allow her to marry for love. Percy Gryce had loved with her and ‘everyone at Bellmont had supposed them to be engaged’ (p. 138) making her rejection of him ‘inexplicable’ (p. 138). Lily could have secured a wealthy husband which who loved her, and so society could not comprehend ‘her dismissal of him’ (p. 138). There is no mention of whether Lily loved Percy or not, implying that in society the women’s feelings towards her husband are irrelevant if he is rich and loves her. It is Lily’s independence which means ‘she has never been understood’ (p. 138). Lily’s ‘dismissal’ based on the fact she does not love him is not fathomed by society, but reinforces her own independence and her ‘New Woman’ identity.

It is important to mention that the ‘New Woman’ is not always a fixed, stable identity. In *The Portrait of a Lady*, Ralph Touchett wants his inheritance to be divided between Isabel and himself in order to provide her with the financial means to enable her to continue her independence and not have to marry for money. Ralph tells Isabel to ‘live as you like best, and your character will form itself. [...] Spread your wings; rise above the ground. It’s never wrong to do that (p. 233). Ralph wants Isabel to continue to develop her character and embrace her freedom. However, Isabel decides to marry Gilbert Osmond. Ralph explains that she was ‘the last person I expected to see caught’ (p. 359) because marriage to Gilbert would ‘put’ her ‘into a cage’ (p. 359). Ralph is demonstrating his awareness of the importance of independence to Isabel. He continues: ‘[y]ou must have changed immensely. A year ago you valued your liberty beyond everything. You wanted only to see life’ (p. 359). Isabel rejects her ‘New Woman’ identity stating ‘I have seen it [...] It doesn’t seem to me so charming’ (p. 359). However, after Isabel’s marriage to Gilbert, James ‘presents the reader only with the

Isabel who has already passed from happiness to misery' demonstrating how Isabel's liberty and independence are important innate qualities because without them she is miserable.⁴⁰

The 'New Woman' is a figure who does not consistently follow society's expectations. She embraces her own sense of freedom, which leads her to unconsciously challenge social conventions. The 'New Woman' is defined by her sense of innocence and freedom reinforcing her as a private figure, contrasting her to the New Woman as a public figure who argued for a social and political change. Isabel, Daisy, Ellen and Lily are all different characters; however their sense of independence, innocence and freedom unites them. They are all 'natural' characters because they do not repress aspects of their identity in order to conform to society, although Lily at times manipulates her identity in order to 'fit in' to different social situations. However, as Isabel has demonstrated, the 'New Woman' can repress her identity, but this ultimately results in her unhappiness. In this chapter I have outlined how my chosen female characters conform to the 'New Woman' ideal. Chapter two and chapter three will go on to look at how the clothing of these characters reflects their 'New Woman' status.

⁴⁰ Bell, *Meaning in Henry James*, p. 88.

Chapter Two – Clothing the ‘New Woman’

The ‘New Woman’s’ clothing is a medium for her to reflect her own freedom and liberation from society. This chapter will focus on the initial introductions to Daisy Miller, Ellen Olenska and Lily Bart, examining how their clothing immediately contrasts them to the ‘conventional’ nineteenth-century woman who are epitomised in the characters of Pansy Gilbert and May Wellend. This first part of this chapter will outline some of the different ideas about clothing in the nineteenth century in order to create an understanding about the significance of dress. The second part of this chapter will analyse the introductions to each of the ‘New Women’ looking at how Daisy, Ellen and Lily’s dress challenges expectations of society. It will also briefly mention how Isabel Archer contrasts to the other ‘New Women’ because her clothing conforms to expectations of society and the significance of this for her character.

‘During the second half of the nineteenth century the subject [of dress] was seen in a different light, becoming a matter of important social concern’, with women’s clothing becoming an object of focus and reform.⁴¹ In 1851, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Amelia Bloomer, ‘two leading American feminist writers and activists’, challenged the assumption that it was only men who wore trousers by wearing ‘a costume which consisted of a sack coat, a loose-waisted dress which fell only to the knees and a pair of draped trousers, gathered at the ankle’.⁴² This style of dress was understood to be more practical compared to the fashionable mid-nineteenth century restrictive ‘form-fitting bodices, tightly laced corsets and swelling skirts which not only enhanced the natural contours of the feminine form but also underlined women’s dependent status’.⁴³

⁴¹ Byrde, *Nineteenth Century Fashion*, p. 167.

⁴² Kate Luck, ‘Trousers: Feminism in Nineteenth-Century America’, in *The Gendered Object*, ed. Pat Kirkham (Manchester: Manchester U.P., 1996), p. 141.

⁴³ Byrde, *Nineteenth Century Fashion*, p. 54.

Fashionable styles of dress restricted women's movement, making them 'dependent' on men and often confining them to the home. Consequently, Stanton and Bloomer's practical and functional style of dress aimed to enable women to have an ease of movement, which was needed because '[a]fter 1850, however, there were some signs that a woman's role might possibly be more active and less home-bound in the future'.⁴⁴ Here, we can see how calls for a clothing reform were associated with women's changing roles within society. Stanton 'was one of the most important leaders of the woman's rights movement' with her ideas challenging 'the conventions of the nineteenth century that constrained women's lives and excluded women from public life'.⁴⁵ Bloomer 'was a leading advocate for women's rights, especially voting rights'.⁴⁶ Stanton and Bloomer challenged women's subordination and lack of rights within the gender hierarchy and as a consequence of Stanton and Bloomer's feminist aims it made it 'all too easy to identify their advocacy of trousered dress with a desire to disrupt patriarchal order and usurp male privilege'.⁴⁷ The disruption of ideas about both femininity and feminine dress resulted in a 'fierce debate about dress and gender' because they had 'challenged the presumption that only man should wear trousers and that woman's proper garment was the skirt, a presumption so deep-seated that it had acquired that status of "natural" law'.⁴⁸ The use of 'natural' is key because it reveals how the 'feminine' aspects of women's clothing, such as the skirt, were understood to be inherently linked to ideas of femininity, thus a woman's character. Any challenge to 'feminine dress' threatened to destabilise the strict nineteenth-century expectations of gender. While Bloomer herself 'had come to believe that there was no moral or social reason why women should not

⁴⁴ Byrde, *Nineteenth Century Fashion*, p. 54.

⁴⁵ Sue Davis, *The Political Thought of Elizabeth Cady Stanton: Women's Rights and the American Political Traditions* (London: New York U. P., 2008), p. 1.

⁴⁶ Neil A. Hamilton, *Rebels and Renegades: A Chronology of Social and Political Dissent in the United States* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 109.

⁴⁷ Luck, 'Trousers', p. 143.

⁴⁸ Luck, 'Trousers', p. 141.

adopt men's dress, she took great pains to demonstrate that bloomer costume could be a "womanly" dress' in an attempt to make this style of dress more socially acceptable.⁴⁹

Similar to Stanton and Bloomer, American feminist, Helen Gilbert Ecob also believed that woman's clothing should be practical and functional. However, their demands for a dress reform were based upon different reasons. In Ecob's 1893 guidebook, *The Well-Dressed Woman: A Study in the Practical Application to Dress of the Laws of Health, Art, and Morals*, she outlines her expectations of the outcome of her dress reform. She acknowledges the significance of 'the Bloomer episode' which 'called universal attention to the great need of rational dress'.⁵⁰ Nevertheless, the fact that Ecob's book was written 40 years after the 'Bloomer episode' demonstrates the lack of progression that had been made because '[a]s the nineteenth century drew to a close [...] Women were to enter the twentieth century still wearing the full-length skirt, tightly laced corset and boned bodice'.⁵¹ Ecob believed that the restrictive quality of women's clothing prevented them from achieving their physical potential, which in turn resulted in their subordination, because 'a life of intellectual and moral equality demands physical equality'.⁵² Ecob's argument was supported by Professor D. A. Sargent of Harvard College who argued that '[t]o women's mode of dress [...] must we look for the constant factors that have tended to retard her development', emphasising the connection between a woman's inferiority and her restrictive clothing.⁵³

⁴⁹ Luck, 'Trousers', p. 143.

⁵⁰ Helen Gilbert Ecob, *The Well-Dressed Woman: A Study in the Practical Application to Dress of the Laws of Health, Art, and Morals* (New York: Fowler and Wells, 1893), p. 130.

⁵¹ Byrde, *Nineteenth Century Fashion*, p. 167.

⁵² Ecob, *The Well-Dressed Woman*, p. 21.

⁵³ Ecob, *The Well-Dressed Woman*, p. 31.

Figure One, 'Fashion for 1893', is an example Ecob provides of nineteenth-century 'fashionable dress', which she considers to be 'irrational' clothing.⁵⁴ Aspects of this 'irrational dress' are the 'corset', 'long, heavy skirts' and 'tight shoes', which cause various health problems varying from 'imped[ing] the movement of the legs' to the displacement of vital organs.⁵⁵ Fashionable dress resulted



Figure One – 'Fashion for 1893'

in 'physical weakness [which] handicaps woman's activities, bars the way to higher education and hinders the development of many noble traits of character'.⁵⁶ Ecob argues that the 'object' of the clothing reform 'is to sheathe the body in such a way as to avoid pressure and give muscular freedom [and] to secure equal distribution of weight and heat [...] The first step to be taken is the abolishment of the corset'.⁵⁷ For Ecob, women's clothing must cover the body, yet not restrict its movement or development. Ecob's argument for practical and functional women's clothing is a consequence of her belief that women's 'irrational dress' was directly linked to their inferior social position. The apparent link between clothing and female subordination reinforces the belief that 'a campaign during the second half of the nineteenth century for more rational styles of clothing was bound up with the wider issues of women's rights and the fight for female emancipation'.⁵⁸

As well as clothing being practical and functional, nineteenth-century clothing reformists, such as Mary Howarth, Bloomer and Ecob, also called for clothing to be simple, meaning that it is not covered in adornment. Bloomer 'argued that the primary

⁵⁴ 'Fashion for 1893', in Ecob, *The Well-Dressed Woman*, p. 194.

⁵⁵ Ecob, *The Well-Dressed Woman*, p. 27.

⁵⁶ Ecob, *The Well-Dressed Woman*, p. 23.

⁵⁷ Ecob, *The Well-Dressed Woman*, p. 132.

⁵⁸ Byrde, *Nineteenth Century Fashion*, p. 167.

function of reform dress was to free the body rather than ornate it'.⁵⁹ In an article for *Pall Magazine* in 1901 on nineteenth-century fashion, Howarth stated that for women, 'the secret of successful dressing lies in the avoidance of every exaggeration'.⁶⁰

Howarth is implying that in order to achieve social 'success' women should dress simply and plainly. Ecob argues that clothing should not have 'to cater to the demand for the beautiful'. She is critical of those who 'blindly follow fashions' because 'vanity and the display of personal beauty are besetting sins'.⁶¹ By reinforcing the assumption that an interest in fashion is a result of 'vanity', Ecob is suggesting that those who wear adorned or fashionable dress are undermining the characteristics of modest femininity. These writers are shunning the aesthetic quality of clothing in terms of its appearance, instead placing emphasis on its practical, social and political functions.

Theorist Judith Butler addresses the social and political function of clothing in her book, *Gender Trouble*. She argues that the body 'is a border and boundary tenuously maintained for the purpose of social regulation and control' because society dictates what clothing is acceptable in order to ensure conformity.⁶² In the nineteenth century, women's white dress 'was a sign of youth, innocence and purity, and had become almost mandatory formal wear for the Victorian *jeune fille*; white was also correct summer-wear in the nineteenth-century for most ages'.⁶³ Therefore, women dressed in white in order to conform to expectations of society, which in turn meant that they were 'communicating' to others the characteristics suggested by the colour white. James and Wharton deliberately dress Pansy Osmond in *The Portrait of a Lady* and May Wellend in *The Age of Innocence* in white in order to express their conformity to

⁵⁹ Luck, 'Trousers', p. 143.

⁶⁰ Mary Howarth, 'Dress of the Nineteenth Century', in *The Pall Mall Magazine*, (Feb, 1901), pp. 181-191, p. 187.

⁶¹ Ecob, *The Well-Dressed Woman*, p. 206, p. 233.

⁶² Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 182.

⁶³ Hughes, *Dressed in Fiction*, p. 115.

expectations of femininity. Pansy is representative of Linton's 'ideal womanhood' as the docile and dependent young woman. Pansy has been conditioned by the nuns at the convent into becoming 'a real little woman' (p. 242) making her 'so neat, so complete in her manner; and yet in character, as one could see, so innocent and infantine' (p. 292). James problematises this ideal because Pansy 'whose absence of initiative, of conversation, of personal claims, seemed [...] in a girl of twenty, unnatural and even sinister' (p. 515). Pansy wore a 'white dress, and her fair hair was neatly arranged in a net; she wore a pair of slippers, tied, sandal-fashion, about her ankles' (p. 267). Her conservative and simple 'white' dress functions as a physical embodiment of her innocence. Pansy's white clothing simultaneously indicates and reinforces her conformity to the passive feminine ideal as well as symbolising her entrapment within this 'role' because she does not have any agency in her own life. Pansy 'was evidently impregnated with the idea of submission, which was due to any one who took the tone of authority; and she was a passive spectator of the operation of her fate' (p. 246). Pansy's life is dictated by her father to the extent that he prevented her from marrying the man she loves by returning her to the convent where she grew up. Instead of challenging his decision Pansy believes that it is 'right' for her to return to the convent for a 'little retreat' because she has 'been so much in the world this winter' (p. 559), which emphasises her 'unnatural[ly]' submissive and passive character.

May embodies the feminine ideal, with her 'correct' choice of dress reinforcing her ability to get it 'right' (p. 16) in society. She frequently wears white, whether it be to the Opera or the Newport Archery Club meeting where she wore a 'white dress, with a pale green ribbon about the waist and a wreath of ivy on her hat' (p. 133). The use of white reflects May's conformity to expectations of dress and femininity. May's conformity meant that there was 'no better match in New York' (p. 24) than her. It is

questionable whether May's clothing is deliberately white in order to show her conformity to society's expectations of femininity ensuring 'social regulation' or whether it is an unconscious decision meaning that her appearance mirrors her character suggesting an natural quality in the way clothing reflects character. Wharton further complicates the use of white when she leads the reader to question the extent to which the characteristics of the feminine ideal are to be idealised when Newland speculates 'what if "niceness" carried to that supreme degree were only a negation, the curtain dropped before an emptiness? [...] he had the feeling that he had never yet lifted that curtain' (p. 133). The use of white is no longer straight forward because it 'can also be negative, cold and colourless'.⁶⁴ The supposedly innate characteristics of femininity, symbolised by May's use of white, are being exposed as being nothing more than a mask to hide the 'emptiness' and lack of character within. Newland's confusion about May's character highlights the problematic nature of using clothing as a means to 'read' a person's character.

Wharton reinforces the idea of a liminal boundary between clothing and character in her novel *The Age of Innocence* when May's wedding dress rips coinciding with her confession to Newland that she had told Ellen about her suspected pregnancy, which resulted in Ellen's decision to leave. The wedding dress is significant because it acts as a means for women to symbolically embody society's expectations of femininity because '[b]y the turn of the [twentieth] century, white had not only become the standard [for wedding dresses] but had also become laden with symbolism – it stood for purity, virginity, innocence and promise'.⁶⁵ In order to save her marriage, May manipulated the situation to get Ellen to leave making it pivotal moment in her

⁶⁴ Hughes, *Dressed in Fiction*, p. 115.

⁶⁵ Chrys Ingraham, *White Wedding: Romancing Heterosexuality in Popular Culture* (London: Routledge, 2009), p. 60.

relationship with Newland because May has now gained power in the relationship. The loss of May's passive femininity and innocence is reflected in the ruining of her wedding dress implying fluidity between May's clothing and her character. James highlights his awareness about the liminal boundary between clothing and character when Madame Merle questions:

What do you call one's self? Where does it begin? Where does it end? It overflows into everything that belongs to us – and then it flows back again. I know that a large part of myself is in the dresses I choose to wear (p. 211).

Madame Merle recognises how clothing is an integral part in expressing character. Our 'self', thus our identity, is apparent in 'everything' that we own. Merle suggests there is no distinction between our 'inner' and 'outer' character, because our identity 'flows' between the two.

In *Daisy Miller*, *The Age of Innocence* and *The House of Mirth* the first appearance of the 'New Women' characters immediately introduces the relationship between the 'New Woman' and her clothing due to the focus on Daisy, Ellen and Lily's physical appearance and dress, suggesting the importance of this to their characters. Daisy, Ellen and Lily's clothing reflects their 'New Woman' identity and their individuality because their clothing does not always conform to expectations of dress. Their clothing empowers them because it shows their freedom from society's constraints. Although Lily often constructs her identity using clothing in order to 'fit in' to certain social situations or seduce a certain character she still conforms to my understanding of the 'New Woman' because she is showing her agency over her identity and empowering herself by constructing it how she wants to be perceived while embracing her interest in clothing. In contrast to Daisy, Ellen and Lily's clothing, Isabel's reflects expectations of society highlighting how she is not fully accepting of her 'New Woman' identity.

In *Daisy Miller* Winterbourne's first observation of Daisy is that she is a 'beautiful young lady' (p. 6) and before she speaks her character is defined in relation to her physical appearance. Daisy:

was dressed in white muslin, with a hundred frills and flounces, and knots of pale-coloured ribbon. She was bare-headed; but she balanced in her hand a large parasol, with a deep border of embroidery and she was strikingly, admirably pretty (p. 6).

The repeated references to her beauty reinforces the importance of her physical appearance. Similar to Pansy and May's dress, the use of 'white' implies Daisy's the key traits of her character: innocence and naivety. It is the mention of the 'frills and flounces, and knots of pale-coloured ribbon' on Daisy's dress, which reveals her deviation from society's expectations of simple and practical dress symbolising her 'New Woman' identity. Whereas Pansy and May's simple white dresses emphasise their conformity to society and their ability to get it 'right', the adornment on Daisy's dress reflects her failure to conform to the expectations of women's dress. Daisy's clothing asserts her own independence because her distinctive, unique dress reflects her character's freedom from society and her 'New Woman identity'.

In *The Age of Innocence* the reader's first introduction to Ellen is at the Opera where she wore a 'dark blue velvet gown rather theatrically caught up under her bosom by a girdle with a large old-fashioned clasp' (p. 7). A sense of mystery and 'excitement' (p. 8) is created about Ellen because her 'unusual' clothing differs from the norm. As a 'New Woman' Ellen's character contrasts to conventional femininity, therefore her clothing expresses her character. Part of the excitement created by Ellen's appearance is due to the rumours about her divorce; however, the rest is because of her dress.

Katherine Joslin writes that '[c]uriously, Wharton places the Empire gown, perhaps the quintessential style of the early twentieth-century France, at the centre of a story about

nineteenth-century American taste'.⁶⁶ Joslin continues that '[i]n dressing Ellen Olenska, Wharton signals a desire for freedom' because 'the Empire gown she wears, of course, is meant to be out of style' and so Ellen is making 'the argument that fashion ought to be a matter of individual taste and desire'.⁶⁷ Joslin's argument highlights how fashion is understood within a social context, whereas it should be regarded as the 'individual' choice of its wearer, which is how the 'New Woman' uses clothing. The 'unusual' (p. 7) and 'unfashionable' choice of putting Ellen in an Empire dress emphasises how Ellen's character differs to other women in society and makes her a stark contrast to May. Ellen's dress symbolises her freedom from society, which the 'New Woman' is associated with, because she is dressing outside of the socially dictated ideas of fashion.

Not only does the Empire dress express Ellen's liberation from society's expectation of fashionable dress, the choice of dress is significant in terms of what it does for the female body. Joslin explains that '[t]he Empire cut literally freed the female body from the corset' resulting in the exposure of the unrestricted female body.⁶⁸ Therefore, Ellen's body is freer than her contemporaries, which physically mirrors her freedom from society because the corset was thought 'to physically and mentally restrict female independence and the freedom of feminine thought'.⁶⁹ Her dress becomes a source of criticism. Newland's sister complains that the dress was 'perfectly plain and flat – like a night-gown (p. 25), indicating how inappropriate others found her dress. The lack of corset means that the body is unrestrained, which is suggestive of the female body and consequently sexuality. These were considered almost taboo subjects

⁶⁶ Katherine Joslin, *Edith Wharton and the Making of Fashion* (Durham: New Hampshire U. P., 2011), p. 120.

⁶⁷ Joslin, *Edith Wharton and the Making of Fashion*, p. 136.

⁶⁸ Joslin, *Edith Wharton and the Making of Fashion*, p. 120.

⁶⁹ Julie Anne Taddeo, 'Corsets of Steel: Steampunk's Reimagining of Victorian Femininity', in *Steaming Into a Victorian Future: A Steampunk Anthology*, eds. Julie Anne Taddeo and Cynthia J. Miller (Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 2013), p.43.

in the nineteenth century. Newland found ‘the way her dress (which had no tucker) sloped away from her thin shoulders shocked and troubled him’ (p. 10). When she leaned forward she revealed ‘a little more shoulder and bosom than New York was accustomed to seeing, at least in ladies who had reasons for wishing to pass unnoticed’ (p. 10). Ellen is challenging society’s expectations of dress, by revealing ‘more’ skin than is acceptable, in doing so she is unconsciously drawing awareness to her own sexuality and attracted the ‘undivided attention of masculine New York’ (p. 8).

Dress acts as a language which allows its wearer to communicate to others aspects of their character. Hughes explains that ‘[d]ress is a social code [...] part of a social system of signs’, which places the ‘reading’ of dress firmly within a social construct.⁷⁰ Therefore, to allow for the effective communication of character and prevent any misunderstanding you have to follow the same ‘social code’ and have the same understanding of clothing. However, Ellen is independent of society and is dressing outside of the ‘social code’, meaning she does not have a ‘system’ to fit into and so her clothing is misinterpreted into making her a sexual and social threat. Ellen is a threat because her uncorseted body is seen to be ‘a reflection of other less well articulated fears about wider issues regarding femininity, related to increased female political activism and the changing position of women generally’.⁷¹ Newland ‘hated to think of May Welland being exposed to the influence of a young woman so careless of the dictates of Taste’ (p. 10) demonstrating his fear about the consequences of Ellen’s dress. Ellen’s dress reveals the link between her clothing and sexuality, defined by her sexual nature and desire, but also highlights her failure to conform to society’s expectations. The threat of female sexuality and desire and the political and social

⁷⁰ Hughes, *Dressed in Fiction*, p. 2.

⁷¹ Leigh Summers, *Bound to Please, A History of the Victorian Corset* (Oxford: Berg, 2001), p.144.

connotation of not wearing a corset results in Newland worrying if Ellen would corrupt May. Ellen 'seemed quite unconscious of the attention it was attracting' (p. 7) demonstrating how she was unaware of the effect she had, which implies she was not consciously dressing in order to seek attention. Therefore, Ellen is dressing for herself, thus she is a 'New Woman'.

The House of Mirth opens with Selden stopping in 'surprise' (p. 3) at the sight of Lily Bart in Grand Central Station. Lily is a 'figure to arrest even the suburban traveller rushing to his last train' (p. 3), with 'the setting of their first meeting emphasiz[ing] Lily's power to draw attention merely as an anonymous spectacle, a spectacle all the more attractive by virtue of its difference from the hurrying and crowded scene'.⁷² The opening emphasises the power of Lily's beauty to 'draw attention' because she always created 'interest' (p. 3) and 'roused speculation' (p. 3). In contrast to *Daisy Miller* and *The Age of Innocence* where the narrator describes Daisy and Ellen's clothing, in *The House of Mirth* the narrator focuses on the effect of Lily's appearance. Seldon observes that Lily was wearing a 'dark hat and veil' (p. 3) and a 'little jewelled watch among her laces' (p. 4). She also had 'slender pink nails, and the sapphire bracelet' on (p. 7). The close attention paid to the minor details of Lily's overall outfit as oppose to the focus being on her clothing, implies the extent to which Lily is interested in both self-adornment and her appearance. Selden sees Lily's interest in her clothing as a connection to her social oppression because he believes that '[s]he was so evidently the victim of the civilization which had produced her, that the links of her bracelet seemed like manacles chaining her to her fate' (p. 7). For Selden, Lily's interest in clothing makes her a superficial 'victim' of consumerist New York society, with the 'links of her

⁷² Ruth Bernard Yeazell, 'The Conspicuous Wasting of Lily Bart', in *The American Novel: New Essays on The House of Mirth*, ed. Deborah Esch (Cambridge: Cambridge U. P., 2001), pp. 15-16.

bracelet' representing the way Lily is 'chained' to her 'fate'. Seldon is implying the association between 'fashionable' dress and women's oppression. Ecob reinforces the connection between the two, with her argument that a clothing reform is needed in order to 'free women from the degrading influence of a social environment which binds [women] to self-adornment'.⁷³ However, in contrast to this view, Lily only has limited control over her social position as an unmarried woman in society without a substantial income, and so her clothing allows her to have power over her social identity because she can maintain control over her appearance. Therefore, Lily's empowering relationship with her clothing undermines the argument of the oppressive and 'degrading' nature of 'self-adornment'.

It is also important to briefly mention how Isabel's clothing does conform to expectations of nineteenth-century society and how this affects her 'New Woman' status. In contrast to Daisy, Ellen and Lily, Isabel states that 'the clothes [...] I choose to wear, don't express me; and heaven forbid they should!' (p. 211) because '[m]y clothes may express the dressmaker, but they don't express me. To begin with, it's not my own choice that I wear them; they are imposed upon me by society' (p. 211). Isabel highlights the complexity surrounding the common assumption we can 'read' a character by their clothing. Although women may choose what to wear, it is dictated to them by society to ensure conformity and 'social regulation' by creating a 'uniform' for women to symbolise their virtue and purity. Isabel is first wearing a 'black dress' (p. 14), which Hughes explains 'takes on multiple meanings. Its immediate, social meaning is that of mourning for her father'.⁷⁴ Hughes continues that the use of the colour black 'as well as being "sober" or "emotional," is also an anti-fashion color (*sic*); but it is

⁷³ Ecob, *The Well-Dressed Woman*, pp. 3-4.

⁷⁴ Clair Hughes, 'Realism into Metaphor: Black and White Dress in the Fiction of Henry James', in *Styling Texts: Dress and Fashion in Literature*, eds. Cynthia G. Kuhn and Cindy L. Carlson (New York: Cambria Press, 2007), p. 238.

itself a kind of uniform, denying full expression to the self'.⁷⁵ Isabel's conformity to expectations of dress demonstrates her failure to fully express her individuality and so in 'denying full expression to the self' she is contrasting herself to the 'New Women' figures of Daisy, Ellen and Lily. It is important to note that as we have seen in chapter one Isabel loses her independence and her 'New Woman' characteristics, whereas Daisy, Lily and Ellen do not. Therefore, as a consequence of failing to fully embrace her 'New Woman' identity Isabel has to repress part of her character in order to conform to expectations of dress, which makes her 'New Woman' identity unstable and ultimately makes it easier for her to lose it.

This chapter has demonstrated the complexity surrounding the topic of women's clothing in the nineteenth century, analysing how key clothing reformists believed clothing should be practical and functional. Ecob wanted women's clothing to allow them to have adequate physical stimulation to aid mental stimulation and Bloomer wanted it to help with the freedom of movement. Such characters as Pansy and May offer a conventional view of women's simple clothing to reflect their conformity to expectations of nineteenth-century femininity. This then shows how the 'New Women' figures, of Daisy, Ellen and Lily, immediately contrast to the expectations of nineteenth-century dress through their unusual clothing. This chapter has specifically focused on what the first introductions say about the 'New Woman' and how this contrasts to the traditional understanding of clothing. The next chapter will offer a detailed analysis of the way each character inhabits their clothing.

⁷⁵ Hughes, 'Realism into Metaphor', p. 238.

Chapter Three – Inhabiting Clothing

Chapter Two has shown how Daisy, Ellen and Lily's clothing expresses their 'New Woman' identity from their first introductions. As each narrative progresses, we can see how Daisy, Ellen and Lily inhabit their clothing, showing how it becomes more than an object, it is a part of them. It has also been mentioned that Isabel's clothing conforms to expectations of nineteenth-century society, which ultimately leads to the repression of her 'New Woman' characteristics. This chapter will develop the ideas mentioned in chapter two, in order to examine how each character inhabits their clothing to reflect their 'New Woman' identity. It will also briefly analyse the way in which fashion is depicted in each text and the importance of it to the 'New Woman'.

Thesander explains that '[w]omen have been made synonymous with their bodies'.⁷⁶ The female body is an 'object of social control', which is apparent in the restrictive nature of the corset both symbolically and physically limiting women's freedom.⁷⁷ Here, it is important to make a distinction between fashionable dress and expectations of dress. Fashion and fashionable dress 'is taken to mean clothing designed primarily for its expressive and decorative qualities',⁷⁸ whereas expectations of dress relate to the 'modest' dress of 'ideal womanhood'. The complexity of the term fashion is apparent in the nineteenth century because '[t]he strengthening of pervasive middle-class moral codes [...] sat uneasily with the growing commodification of fashionable trends and interests'.⁷⁹ Fashion while being a social construct, is also a problematic subject, because of the way the associations with ideas of vanity and frivolity undermine expectations of femininity. Therefore, each 'New Woman's' relationship

⁷⁶ Marianne Thesander, *The Feminine Ideal* (London: Reaktion Books, 1997), p. 9.

⁷⁷ Thesander, *The Feminine Ideal*, p. 7.

⁷⁸ Christopher Beward, *The Culture of Fashion: A New History of Fashionable Dress* (Manchester: Manchester U. P., 1995), p. 5.

⁷⁹ Christopher Beward, *The Culture of Fashion*, p. 147.

with fashion is complex, yet their resistance to society's scrutiny about fashionable dress is apparent.

In *Daisy Miller*, Daisy's is defined by her innocence, and her white clothing reflects this. The 'excess of frills and flounces' on her dress implies her sense of individuality, expressing her 'New Woman' identity. Daisy clothing also conforms to ideas of fashionable dress, which creates the impression that her character is superficial and vain to the matriarchal figures in society, such as Mrs Costello. While Winterbourne observed Daisy 'as she moved away, drawing her muslin furbelows over the gravel, [he] said to himself that she had the *tournure* of a princess' (p.15). James focuses on the overall effect of Daisy's dress, as oppose to extensively detailing her outfit, reinforcing how Daisy inhabits her clothing. Her dress creates the effect of giving her the carriage and presence of a princess. By comparing Daisy to a princess, James is reinforcing Daisy's innocence while suggesting an element of superiority because she is being likened to royalty, which is ironic given her lower social status. In relation to this dress, Hughes explains that it reflects the 'bustled and trained styles of the time [which] emphasized a rear view' meaning that 'Daisy's dress is therefore not only gracefully fashionable, but suitable for a *jeune fille*'.⁸⁰ Daisy is mirroring the socially constructed ideas of femininity, as well as dressing appropriately for a young woman, which is emphasised when Mrs Costello acknowledges how Daisy 'dresses in perfection' (p. 17). However, she is critical of Daisy because she can't understand where she gets her 'taste' (p. 17). Mrs Costello's failure to comprehend where Daisy gets her 'taste' from suggests how ideas of fashion are related to social class. The relation between fashion and social class is reinforced in *The Age of Innocence* because May Wellend also dresses 'in perfection', which allows her to maintain her social status and demonstrate her idealised

⁸⁰ Hughes, 'Realism into Metaphor', p. 235.

femininity, whereas even when Daisy does dress ‘in perfection’, her clothing is still a source of scrutiny and criticism. This implies that Daisy’s lower social status means that fashionable clothing is not deemed acceptable for her. Daisy’s embraces her independence, and also suggests that her ‘taste’ is innate to her because there is no evidence of where she would develop her knowledge of fashion.

Daisy’s clothing is not only a means for her to express her ‘inner’ identity, it is also offers her a form of comfort. When Daisy explains that she is ‘going to the Pincio’ gardens (p. 37), her mother and Mrs Walker speak of their disapproval of this idea, while Winterbourne observes the conversation. Daisy ‘stood there smiling and smoothing her bonnet ribbons’ (p. 37), while being subject to their scrutiny, suggesting that her clothing offers her a means to maintain her composure. This idea is emphasised when her brother naively claimed he was going to take his ‘pole’ ‘to Italy’ (p. 7), and Daisy ‘glanced over the front of her dress, and smoothed out a knot or two of ribbon’ (p. 7). Daisy’s uncertainty about her brother’s idea, leads her to focus on her dress in order to distract herself from what he is saying. The liminal boundary between Daisy’s character and her dress reinforces how she inhabits her clothing. Her dress empowers her because it reflects her identity and offers her a form of comfort. However, it is her preoccupation with her clothing that results in criticism and the assumption of her superficial nature. Hughes explains that there was a ‘[m]istrust of excessive concern for dress’.⁸¹ An interest in clothing is often associated with ideas of vanity and triviality, which undermines ideas of femininity and becomes a source of criticism. Whereas Daisy’s outfits are not described in detail,⁸² James pays particular attention to Daisy’s accessories, which suggests her ‘excessive concern for dress’. The narrator explains that

⁸¹ Hughes, *Dressed in Fiction*, p. 1.

⁸² Hughes, ‘Realism into Metaphor’, p. 235.

Daisy's 'extremely pretty hands [were] ornamented with very brilliant rings' (p. 10), which suggests that Daisy is adorned with her jewellery. Thesander argues that '[w]omen were reduced to being decorative objects and moral guardians, in sharp contrast with men, who led a free and active life'.⁸³ However, Daisy as a 'New Woman' expresses the way being 'decorative' is not necessarily reductive because it allows a woman to embrace her 'inner' self and adorn herself how she wants to. Therefore, she is 'free' and 'active' in making decisions about her appearance.

The 'New Woman's' clothing reinforces her individuality and her independence from society because it does not conform to nineteenth-century expectations of dress. From Ellen's initial appearance in New York society, it is apparent that she does not dress according to the 'social code'.⁸⁴ This is reinforced when the narrator explains that '[i]t was 'usual for ladies who received in the evening to wear what were called "simple dinner dresses"' (p. 67). The use of 'simple' implies that the dress is to be relatively unadorned and in keeping in line with expectations of dress at the time was 'a close-fitting armour of whale-boned silk, slightly open in the neck, with lace ruffles filling in the crack, and tight sleeves with a flounce uncovering just enough wrist to show an Etruscan gold bracelet or a velvet band' (p. 67). The corset-like quality of the 'close-fitting armour of whale-boned silk' implies the confining aspect of the dress for its wearer in order 'to physically and mentally restrict female independence and the freedom of feminine thought'.⁸⁵ It was thought that this would deter female movement, often leading to confinement within the home and so the corset became 'more than a status symbol: it was a complex of control and meaning systems connected to women's "frozen" position in society'.⁸⁶ Therefore, restrictive clothing both reflects and

⁸³ Thesander, *The Feminine Ideal*, p. 45.

⁸⁴ Hughes, *Dressed in Fiction*, p. 2.

⁸⁵ Taddeo, 'Corsets of Steel', p.43.

⁸⁶ Thesander, *The Feminine Ideal*, p.13.

contributes to a woman's subordinate and limited social position. The opening at the neck of the dress is covered with 'lace ruffles', which offers a minimal amount of adornment, but its primary function is to maintain the wearer's modesty by ensuring her décolletage is covered. The attention to detail in the description mentioning how the sleeves allow the wearer to have a bracelet on show demonstrates the particular and consistent nature of this 'simple dinner dress' 'uniform', which would make the slightest differentiation noticeable.

In contrast to the conventional 'simple' evening dress is Ellen, who 'heedless of tradition, was attired in a long robe of red velvet bordered about the chin and down the front with glossy black fur' (p. 67). Joslin defines aesthetic dress as being 'made of soft fabrics and in rich unconventional shades of red, amber, and blue. Her cloaks and gowns drape the body without the artificial shape of a tight corset or superficial decoration'.⁸⁷ Aesthetic dress is in opposition to the 'simple' dress advocated by society in order to conform to expectations of modest dress. The 'unconventional' use of 'red' illustrates how Ellen's clothing differs from expectations of society. The association between 'red' and ideas of sexuality and desire, suggest a link between Ellen's clothing and her sexual desire, which undermines the 'purity' associated with idealised femininity, thus reflecting her independence from society. The elegant and simple 'lace ruffles' of the 'simple' dress are in opposition to the 'glossy black fur' suggesting the luxuriousness and glamorousness of Ellen's outfit and her character. The use of 'fur' suggests an animalistic quality, which links to ideas about nature and natural, reinforcing the 'natural' quality of Ellen's character. There is also a sense of irony discussing ideas about 'nature' and 'natural' when writing about a naturalistic writer, such as Wharton.

⁸⁷ Joslin, *Edith Wharton and the Making of Fashion*, p. 125.

Ellen's robe 'drapes' her body, which frees it from the restraint of the corset. Wilson explains that a part of the 'strangeness of dress is that it links the biological body to the social being, and public to private'.⁸⁸ On the one hand dress is a means make your 'private' identity 'public', which is how the 'New Woman' using clothing. However, using the example of the corset, its restrictive quality becomes a way to 'privatise' the body by creating a uniform body shape for women, thus resulting in female conformity. Therefore, Ellen's failure to dress in a corset, makes her body public due to its lack of confinement and conformity to other women's body shape. The freed female body is seen as a source of sexual desire, and 'at its most extreme [...] the woman becomes no more than an orifice for male penetration'.⁸⁹ For Newland, Ellen's freed body is a site of sexual desire. Her body language, with her 'sat half-reclined, her head propped on a hand and her wide sleeve leaving the arm bare to the elbow' (p. 67), creates an intimate scene and suggests her sexuality. It is as though the reader is intruding on Ellen's private space and the sexual tension between Newland and Ellen. Our view of Ellen's dress has been filtered through Newland's perspective, and so it is described through the male gaze.

Laura Mulvey writes that '[t]he determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role, women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact'.⁹⁰ Newland's male gaze is projecting ideas of his desire onto Ellen, resulting in her clothing having an erotic impact. The eroticism of Ellen's dress for Newland is apparent when he states that '[t]here was something perverse and provocative in the notion of fur worn in the evening in a heated drawing-room, and in

⁸⁸ Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams*, p. 2.

⁸⁹ Barbara Brook, *Feminist Perspectives on the Body* (London and New York: Longman, 1999), p.67.

⁹⁰ Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', in *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Bloomington: Indiana U. P., 2009), p. 11.

the combination of a muffled throat and bare arms; but the effect was undeniably pleasing' (pp. 67-68). The focus on the overall effect of Ellen's body language and clothing, demonstrates the way in which she inhabits her dress. Byrde explains that '[d]ress was a reflection of status but it was also required to be appropriate to the time of the day and occasion'.⁹¹ Ellen's wearing of fur at an 'inappropriate' time further reinforces her independence from society's expectations of dress, which in turn has a 'provocative' effect on Newland.

There are many ways to 'read' clothing, firstly we have seen how Ellen's dress is individual to her, so it reflects her 'inner' identity, thus her character with its sense of freedom from expectations of society. Then there is what Newland, representative of the male gaze 'sees' in her clothing, which he sees as evidence of her sexual desire, and finally, what society understands by 'reading' Ellen's clothing. Hughes reinforces the danger of relying on clothing to 'read' a character warning that '[d]ress in descriptions, in general, is over-determined, polyvalent, restless, but one of its most consistent and most treacherous uses in fiction is to suggest the moral state of a character'.⁹² Clothing is open to misinterpretation because it is defined and 'read' within the culturally constructed understanding of fashion and expectations of dress, and the connotations which are attached to them. Consequently, the way in which the 'New Woman's' dress is personal to her, so it does not conform to nineteenth-century ideas about dress and fashion, becomes a deceitful means to determine the 'moral state of [her] character'. Ellen's 'scandalous divorce-suit' (p. 63) makes her a threat to other women in society, especially for May as a result of Newland's attraction to Ellen, because they fear what she represents. As a woman who left her husband for another man, Ellen undermines

⁹¹ Byrde, *Nineteenth Century Fashion*, p. 119.

⁹² Hughes, 'Realism into Metaphor', p. 232.

the sanctity of marriage, a key institution in maintaining the stability of society, while explicitly revealing her sexual desire undermining the 'purity' of 'ideal womanhood'. Sophy reveals how Ellen 'is a great favourite with the gentlemen' (p. 183). She said this 'with her air of wishing to put forth something conciliatory when she knew that she was planting a dart' (p. 183). Sophy is insinuating that Ellen's clothing makes her favourable with the men in society, which is seen by how captivated they are by her when she appears at the Opera. Joslin argues that '[a]t first blush, it would seem that Ellen wears décolleté to lure the men around her; she is, after all, a woman who has left her husband and may be in the market for another man'.⁹³ However, Ellen does not notice the male attention she receives, such as at the Opera, suggesting that she 'does not consciously expose her body, and it is precisely that confusion over fashion that moves the action of the novel'.⁹⁴ The 'confusion' between what Ellen 'means' by her clothing and how this is misinterpreted by society results in the misunderstanding of her character as a sexual threat for society.

Lily Bart is a 'New Woman', and like Ellen and Daisy she is empowered by her clothing; however, whereas Ellen's clothing consistently demonstrates her freedom from society's constraints in terms of social etiquette and clothing, Lily's clothing enables her to construct and adapt her identity to suit a certain situation or purpose. Lily's clothing may not always be expressing her 'inner' identity and her freedom from society in the same way as Ellen and Daisy, but she is still expressing her independence and asserting her agency by creating different identities. Lily inhabits her clothing to the extent that Wharton does not often describe her dress in detail. During Lily's attempt to seduce Percy Gryce on the train he was 'was enveloped in the scent of her dress' (p.

⁹³ Joslin, *Edith Wharton and the Making of Fashion*, p. 120.

⁹⁴ Joslin, *Edith Wharton and the Making of Fashion*, p. 120.

16). The 'scent' implies that her dress is more than a functional item of clothing, it is an extension of her, implying the liminal boundary between Lily and her clothing. Whereas Butler argues that clothing is used as a boundary to stop one expressing their individuality, Lily's clothing is used to captivate others.

In order to secure a marriage proposal from Percy Gryce Lily 'had an idea that the sight of her in a grey gown of devotional cut, with her famous lashes drooped above a prayer-book, would put the finishing touch to Mr Gryce's subjugation' (p. 47). Lily is constructing her identity in order to confirm to what she believes Percy wants in a wife. Her simple 'gown' is 'grey' in colour which conforms to the unadorned expectations of dress, contrasting to her first appearance in the novel where she is adorned with her jewellery. However, Percy chooses to marry Evie Van Osburgh who was 'the youngest, dullest, dullest of the four dull and dumpy daughters' of Mrs Van Osburgh (p. 80). Lily's contemptuous description of Evie highlights her horror at a plain and 'dumpy' woman marrying Percy. The gap between Lily's comprehension of the characteristics Percy wants in a wife and the reality of him wanting the 'dull' Evie whose character echoes Linton's 'ideal womanhood' is apparent. Lily has failed to understand that although her 'grey' 'gown' may conform to expectations of modest dress, she is not reflecting her natural character, which does not embody the 'modest' trait of 'ideal womanhood'.

Lily interposes her own desires for luxury onto the understanding that it is what men look for. Lily states that:

If I were shabby no one would have me: a woman is asked out as much for her clothes as for herself. The clothes are the background, the frame, if you like: they don't make success, but they are a part of it. Who wants a dingy woman? We are expected to be pretty and well-dressed till we drop – and if we can't keep it up alone, we have to go into partnership (p. 11).

Lily is foregrounding the importance of clothing in creating a social identity. In terms of this quotation ‘success’ is understood to be a marriage. Although, throughout the novel Lily values her freedom to highly to accept just any marriage proposal making her ‘success’ maintaining her independence. Lily’s love of clothing and her expensive taste are apparent because her ‘whole being dilated in an atmosphere of luxury’ (p. 23). However, she highlights the tension between her social circumstances and her love of ‘luxury’ because she describes herself as both ‘horribly poor—and very expensive’ (p. 9). Lily is in the problematic position that she does not have a substantial income, yet she believed that the ‘acquiescence in dinginess was evidence of stupidity [...] she almost felt that other girls were plain and inferior from choice’ (p. 78). Lily believes that women make a conscious decision to either be ‘plain’ and conform to society or assert their individuality through their personal choice of dress. Society dictates that women should be modestly, simply and femininely dressed, which as Butler argues is a means to maintain ‘social regulation’.⁹⁵ Lily is suggesting that women make a conscious decision to be ‘plain’ for fear of transgressing social boundaries. Whereas, Lily dresses uniquely and fashionably, expressing her independence from social expectations of dress and femininity, reinforcing her ‘New Woman’ identity.

One of the key scenes of the novel is the *tableau vivant* scene where Lily is imitating Joshua Reynold’s famous painting, ‘Mrs Lloyd’. Reynold’s painting depicts a woman writing the name of her husband to be on a tree; she represents passive femininity and so Lily is ‘personif[ying] the ideal of feminine beauty as eternal, timeless, and beyond price, and thereby augments her value’.⁹⁶ Lily awareness of the importance and power of her beauty in relation to constructing a social identity is

⁹⁵ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 182.

⁹⁶ Barbara Claire Freeman, *The Feminine Sublime: Gender and Excess in Women’s Fiction* (London: California U. P., 1995), p. 58.

apparent because her ‘impulse to show herself in a splendid setting – she had thought for a moment of representing Tiepolo’s Cleopatra – had yielded to the truer instinct of trusting her unassisted beauty’ (p. 119). Lily had momentarily wanted to imitate Cleopatra, who ruled Ancient Egypt alone, which would mean she was embodying the image of powerful femininity, which contrasts to society’s expectations of women. In Tiepolo’s painting Cleopatra is dressed glamorously; however, Lily wanted to be the focus of the tableau ‘without distracting accessories of dress or surroundings’ (p. 119). She chose the opposite of a strong woman, in the form of the passive Mrs Lloyd. Not only is Lily imitating Mrs Lloyd for the purpose of the *tableau*, she is attempting to manipulate her social identity in order to be associated with the characteristics of Mrs Lloyd. Lily’s choice of Reynold’s ‘Mrs Lloyd’ enabled her to show ‘her artistic intelligence in selecting a type so like her own that she could embody the person represented without ceasing to be herself’ (p. 119). Lily ‘crosses the boundary between illusion and reality’⁹⁷ because ‘it was as though she had stepped, not out of, but into, Reynold’s canvas’ (p. 119). Lily does not appear to be imitating Mrs Lloyd, she *is* her during that moment meaning the distinction between the two is blurred, suggesting the fluidity of her social identity.

Hughes writes that ‘Lily believes her new image expresses her individual, moral self – Selden sees only “external harmony”’.⁹⁸ Selden sees Lily as a work of art, as oppose to a character because she ‘seems not to portray art but to be art’.⁹⁹ Selden asks ‘[d]on’t you like her best in that simple dress? It makes her look like the real Lily – the Lily I know’ (p. 119). Selden is reinforcing the opinion that women should be dressed in plain clothing instead of using clothing as a means to adorn oneself. It is ironic that

⁹⁷ Candace Waid, *Edith Wharton’s Letters from the Underworld: Fictions of Women and Writing* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina Press, 1991), p. 28.

⁹⁸ Hughes, *Dressed in Fiction*, p. 148.

⁹⁹ Waid, *Edith Wharton’s Letters from the Underworld*, p. 28.

Selden sees the ‘real’ (p. 119) Lily when she is performing somebody and ‘divested of the trivialities of her little world’ (p. 119) Selden’s patronising description of Lily dismisses her interest in fashion and clothing as a ‘trivialit[y]’ and belittles her ‘little world’. For Selden, ‘her beauty’ was ‘detached from all that cheapened and vulgarised it’ (p. 119), which is understood to be her fashionable clothing and jewellery. Seldon reinforces how Lily’s interest in the superficial is depicted as having negative associations for her character. However, it is a source of empowerment for Lily because her clothing allows her to express herself outside the confines of society’s expectations of women. The repetition of ‘real’ in reference to Lily when she is performing Mrs Lloyd leads the reader to question what her ‘real’ character is: is it the ‘fashionable’ Lily or the simply dressed Lily? It is because Seldon wants to believe Lily is ‘real’ in her simple dress so she conforms to society, making her less of a threat as a ‘New Woman’.

Lily’s performance created a mixed response due to the way her ‘long dryad-like curves that swept upwards from her poised foot to her lifted arm’ (p. 119) were exposed in her sheer white dress. Ned Van Alstyne responded ‘gad, there isn’t a break in the lines anywhere, and I suppose that she wanted us to know it’ (p. 119). Ned is showing Lily’s agency over her identity implying that she consciously wanted to reveal her body. Ned later states ‘what’s a woman want with jewels when she’s got herself to show? The trouble is that all these fal-bals they wear cover up their figures when they’ve got ’em. I never knew till tonight what an outline Lily has’ (p. 122). Ned believes that a woman should be able to ‘show’ herself, instead of dressing to conceal her female body. Margit Strange highlights the power of Lily’s body to ‘invite Van Alstyne to shift his vision between looking at and seeing through the aestheticization the culture has imposed on

the body'.¹⁰⁰ Ned sees through the culturally dictated aspect of dress to conceal the female body questioning why women have to do so. However, in contrast to Ned's progressive view of female clothing, Gus Tenor did not have such a favourable view of Lily arguing that it was '[d]amned bad taste' (p. 122) for her to be exposing her body, reinforcing the strict social expectations of dress.

Whereas Daisy, Ellen and Lily empower themselves by using their dress to express their individuality reflecting their 'New Woman' status, Isabel's clothing results in the repression of her 'New Woman' identity because it conforms to society's expectations of female clothing. Isabel wore 'a white dress ornamented with black ribbons' (p. 103). Hughes outlines how in James's 'detailing is precise in that Isabel's dress conforms becomingly not only to fashion and her youth, but also to the demands of "half-mourning"'.¹⁰¹ Isabel's white dress is appropriate for a young unmarried woman, and the black ribbon reinforces the 'demands of "half-mourning"'. The conformity of her dress, is in opposition to independence of her character. Isabel associates clothing that does not conform the expectations of nineteenth-century dress with superficiality and she 'was resolutely determined not to be superficial' (p. 54). Isabel reflects the conventional belief that clothing is a trivial object, which is associated with vanity. When Ralph drew a caricature of Isabel 'in which she was represented as a very pretty young woman, dressed, in the height of prevailing fashion, in the folds of the national banner' (p. 63) Isabel was of the opinion that her 'chief dread in life, at this period of her development, was that she should appear narrow-minded' (p. 63). The connection between 'prevailing fashion' and the fear of 'appear[ing] narrow-minded' reinforces society's view that fashion was associated with frivolity, which is a trait

¹⁰⁰ Margit Strange, *Personal Property: Wives, White Slaves, and the Market in Women* (Baltimore: John Hopkins U. P., 1998), p. 70.

¹⁰¹ Hughes, 'Realism into Metaphor', p. 238.

Isabel wants to avoid. Isabel's concern with society's opinions of clothing, leads her to repress her individuality in order to conform to expectations of dress.

To conclude, as we get to know each character we can see how Daisy, Lily and Ellen inhabit their clothing in order to reflect aspects of their character and reinforce their individuality Daisy, Lily and Ellen offer a contrast to Isabel whose clothing continues to reflect society's expectations of women's dress. Isabel's failure to fully embrace her identity as a 'New Woman' makes it less stable, which makes it easier to repress during her marriage to Gilbert. Therefore, clothing is an intrinsic part of the way the 'New Woman' expresses their independence. These characters not only wear clothing, they inhabit it so it becomes a part of their identity, revealing the liminal boundary between clothing and the 'inner' self. Without expressing their individuality, their identities become less stable, which consequently results in it becoming easier to repress their sense of independence and freedom.

Conclusion

Using the examples of Daisy Miller, Isabel Archer, Ellen Olenska and Lily Bart, we have seen how the 'New Woman' is characterised by her innate sense of freedom and liberty. One key way in which the 'New Woman' shows her independence is through her clothing. She is empowered because she is not repressing her identity in order to conform to society's expectation of femininity or dress. However, Isabel's clothing *does* conform to society's expectations, thus she is not expressing herself fully. In order to conclude 'Clothing the "New Woman"', it is imperative to examine how each 'New Woman' character ends up in each narrative.

Isabel embodies the 'New Woman' ideal; she is independent and 'natural'. In contrast to the other 'New Women' characters, Isabel's clothing conforms to society's expectations of modest dress because of her concern about being deemed 'superficial' and 'narrow-minded'. Isabel's apprehension about society's opinion results in the repression of her sense of freedom in order to follow the conventions of dress. She receives a substantial income, which her cousin Ralph believes will enable her to have the security to not marry for money, to allow her to continue to develop her character. However, Isabel is manipulated into marrying Gilbert Osmond, resulting in her confinement within the marriage to a controlling husband who 'hates' her (p. 504). Isabel's failure to fully embrace the 'New Woman' ideal, means it was difficult for her to maintain her 'New Woman' identity after her marriage and so she represses her sense of independence in order to conform to the expectations of a wife. However, her marriage and the loss of her identity her 'miserable' (p. 514) and yet she would not leave Gilbert because she 'can't publish [her] mistake' (p. 514), she 'would much rather die' (p. 514). Isabel's fear of society is greater than her misery, which reinforces the loss of her social independence. In the essay '*The Portrait of a Lady: Isabel Archer's*

American Experience', Vijay Prakash Singh argues that '[t]he irony with Isabel Archer is that her destiny is of her own making'.¹⁰² Isabel chose to marry Gilbert, and she chose to return to him at the end of the novel. Therefore, paradoxically not only has the repression of Isabel's 'New Woman' identity and loss of her independence led to her misery at the end of the novel, it was a result of her independence which led her to make the decision to marry Gilbert. Isabel has been empowered by her independence and freedom at the start of the novel; however, it ultimately contributed to her confinement and misery at the end of the novel.

Daisy is characterised by her sense of innocence, implying that her social misgivings are a result of her independence and freedom from society as oppose to a deliberate attempt to challenge social custom. Daisy embraces her 'New Woman' identity and her clothing reflects this. Throughout the narrative Winterbourne tries to understand Daisy's character and even towards the end of the text he cannot decide on Daisy's motives:

He said to himself that she was too light and childish, too uncultivated and unreasoning, too provincial, to have reflected upon her ostracism or even to have perceived it. Then at other moments he believed that she carried about in her elegant and irresponsible little organism a defiant, passionate, perfectly observant consciousness of the impression she produced (p. 50).

Winterbourne is conflicted between whether Daisy is too socially naïve and immature to understand her 'ostracism' or if she was too 'defiant' to care about society's treatment of her. Daisy's statement that people are 'only pretending to be shocked. They don't really care a straw what I do' (p. 57) suggests that she conforms to Winterbourne's latter suspicions about her. Daisy is implying that those in society only 'pretend' to 'be shocked' by her behaviour in order to reinforce their own conformity and position in society, whereas in reality her behaviour does not offend them. Daisy is demonstrating

¹⁰² Singh, *The Portrait of a Lady*, p. 25.

her freedom from society through the inference that she does not care about her position in society, thus she does not act according to social etiquette, reinforcing her 'New Woman' identity.

However, despite Daisy's empowerment through her independence, it is this desire for freedom, which leads to her ostracism from society and ultimately leads to her death. At the end of the novella, Daisy goes to visit the Colosseum with Mr Giovanelli. When Winterbourne encounters her at the Colosseum with Giovanelli where he warns her '[t]his is the way people catch' (p. 60) Roman Fever. However, Daisy responds that she 'was bound to see the Colosseum by moonlight' (p. 60), reinforcing her sense of independence and agency. Afterwards, Winterbourne 'mentioned to no one that he had encountered Miss Miller, at midnight, in the Colosseum with a gentleman' (p. 60), in order to protect her reputation. While out Daisy caught Roman Fever, which led to her death. Despite both Giovanelli and Winterbourne also being at the Colosseum, it is only Daisy who falls ill, suggesting that this is her 'punishment' for transgressing social boundaries.

Lily Bart is characterised by her love of clothing and luxury. Lily differs slightly to the other 'New Women' because she manipulates her identity in order to fit in to different social situations, whether it is wearing a 'grey gown' to seduce Percy Gyrce or imitating Reynold's 'Mrs Lloyd' to encapsulate her naturally beauty and innocence. Lily shows her independent character because she is able to change her appearance as well as embracing her love of clothing and luxury. Lily's aunt argues that 'it's only suitable' for a woman 'to be well-dressed' (p. 111), highlighting the importance placed upon women's clothing in society. Problematically for Lily, to maintain her social position she must remain fashionably dressed; however, this increases her debt, which is a catalyst for her death. The novel exposes the way a woman may exceed her spending,

like Lily in her attempt to be accepted in society, yet she is condemned by the very society she tries to belong to. Wharton could be perceived as exposing the dangers of female vanity. However, I believe she is exposing the problems with society, which is reinforced in her autobiography when she explains that *The House of Mirth* shows how ‘a frivolous society can acquire dramatic significance only through what its frivolity destroys. Its tragic implication lies in its power of debasing people and ideals’.¹⁰³

Society has ‘destroy[ed]’ Lily, when she is ostracised as a result of Bertha Dorset, who manipulated people into believing Lily was ‘trying to marry George Dorset. She did it to make him think she was jealous’ (p. 196) in order to cover up her own affair. Lily cannot defend herself, because:

What is the truth? Where a woman is concerned, it’s the story that’s easier to believe. In this case it’s a great deal easier to believe Bertha Dorset’s story than mine because she has a big house and an opera-box, and it’s convenient to be on good terms with her (p. 197).

Bertha’s secure position in society gives her the ability to humiliate and exclude Lily, highlighting the power that the institution of society has, even over someone who does not frequently follow its conventions.

At the end of the novel Lily commits suicide. Peter J. Rabinowitz explains that the ‘deaths of transgressive women [...] are to be *read as punishment*’.¹⁰⁴ Both Daisy and Lily have deviated from expectations of conventional femininity; however, they are both more ‘natural’ and innocent than those in society who condemn, making their ‘punishment’ undeserved. This is reinforced when ‘Lily unobtrusively destroys the evidence that would threaten her principal enemy [Bertha] with exposure’.¹⁰⁵ Lily is

¹⁰³ Edith Wharton, *A Backward Glance* (New York: Scribner’s, 1934), p. 207.

¹⁰⁴ Peter J. Rabinowitz, “‘A’ is for Alibi”, in *Famous Last Words: Changes in Gender and Narrative Closer*, ed. Alison Booth (Charlottesville: Virginia U. P., 1993), pp. 339-340.

¹⁰⁵ Yeazell, ‘The Conspicuous Wasting of Lily Bart’, p. 15.

helping the woman would ‘destroy[ed]’ here, leading the reader to question the unfair treatment of Lily, while highlighting the hypocrisy of society.

In *The Age of Innocence* Ellen ‘is an outsider, dark, enigmatic, exotic and elusive’.¹⁰⁶ Ellen is an enigma in New York society, with her desire for independence and her own style of dress making her a ‘New Woman’. Newland’s attraction to Ellen stems from her ‘elusive’ quality, and leads to society suspecting they are having an affair. May Wellend tells Ellen about her suspected pregnancy in order to make Ellen leave. At the farewell dinner party for Ellen, Newland realised ‘that to all of them he and Madame Olenska were lovers [...] He guessed himself to have been, for months, the centre of countless silently observing eyes’ (p. 211). After ‘the separation between himself and the partner of his guilt had been achieved, and that now the whole tribe had rallied about his wife on the tacit assumption that nobody knew anything’ (p. 212). Newland ‘caught the glitter of victory in his wife’s eyes’ (p. 214) revealing her ‘success’ at removing Ellen from their society. The novel ends with Newland and his son visiting Ellen’s apartment in Paris, instead of going to see her Newland waits outside, while his son goes in. Ellen did not returned to her husband and ‘had made no change in her way of living’ (p. 226) suggesting that she maintained her independence. As he is waiting outside he imagines what she looks like now and where she would be sitting and decides that ‘[i]t’s more real to me here than if I went up’ (p. 229). Ellen is no longer a reality for Newland, but an imagined character based upon his ‘youthful memory of her’ (p. 227). Newland returns to his hotel, instead of going inside to see Ellen, leaving her to remain a fantasy: an imagined figured. This is significant because the elusive quality of the ‘New Woman’ is that people cannot ‘understand’ her, meaning

¹⁰⁶ Linda Costanzo Cahir, *Solitude and Society in the Works of Herman Melville and Edith Wharton* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1999), p. 113.

she is an enigma and Newland is cementing this idea by leaving Ellen as an imagined character instead of seeing the reality of her. Newland would rather Ellen remain frozen in time as the figure from his youth, highlighting his nostalgia for an early time than accept the new world he is in; he keeps her as a memory rather than face the reality of her 'New Woman' status.

This discussion argued that the 'New Woman' is characterised by her innate sense of independence and liberty, and a key way in which she expresses her 'inner' identity is through her clothing. As we have seen there are different nuances in my understanding of the 'New Woman' and how she expresses her innate sense of independence; however, there is a common trend in the way that they embrace their sense of freedom and personal liberation. Whereas Isabel's clothing does not reflect her independence, making her 'New Woman' identity less stable, which leads to her ultimately having to repress her essence of freedom. Despite the endings of each narrative differing, there is a general sense that all the heroines end up in unfavourable situations. Daisy, Lily and Ellen are all ostracised from the society they try to inhabit. Both Daisy and Lily die and Isabel returns to her manipulative and controlling husband. Each 'New Woman' is ultimately 'punished' for her transgressive femininity and deviation from society, which suggests that society is not ready for a figure who expresses her independence from its rigid confines because the 'threat' is ultimately removed. Whether this can be conclusively stated across nineteenth-century literature is not something that can be definitively concluded due to the small selection of texts examined. This dissertation has only begun to examine the relationship between the 'New Woman' and clothing, therefore, to further this research a wider analysis of texts would need to be studied, including different authors to examine the way the 'New Woman's' clothing reflects her character.

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