



HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS

The Fabric of her Fiction:

*Virginia Woolf's Development of Literary Motifs based on
Clothing and Fashion in Mrs Dalloway, To the Lighthouse and
Orlando: A Biography*

Ritgerð til M.A.-prófs

Ásta Andrésdóttir

Maí 2011

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Abstract

This essay argues that leading modernist Virginia Woolf (1882-1941) broke new grounds in regards to the application of clothing in fiction. As well as being external indicators of a particular set of values or social status, clothing also exposed her characters' inner realities, evoking various experiences and sensations. The essay demonstrates how, from her childhood onwards, Woolf was fascinated by clothes and fashion, leading to a profound influence on her life and work, as can be discerned throughout her works, though in the novels *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), *To the Lighthouse* (1927), *Orlando: A Biography* (1928) and short stories 'Mrs Dalloway in Bond Street' (1923) and 'The New Dress' (1927) in particular. In Woolf's fiction of the early twenties, the motif of clothing primarily constituted a marker for personal identity and class affiliation. By means of her term 'frock consciousness,' she explored her own feelings of inferiority and shame associated with being inappropriately dressed in public, the conflict of dichotomies such as mind and body, consumption and creation, femininity and masculinity. *Mrs Dalloway* criticized and exposed the social system as an impassable barrier hopelessly dividing people. In *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf explored abstract ways of applying clothing in fiction, using haunting symbols such as empty gloves, unfinished stockings, lost heirlooms and fading shawls, representing absence, grief and death, paying tribute to her late mother, eloquently fictionalizing memories related to and conjured by such objects. In *Orlando: A Biography*, Woolf turned clothing into elaborate and sophisticated metaphors of sex and gender and their assigned roles in twentieth-century society, moreover boldly criticizing the pomposity and vanity of the educated professions, still exclusive to men.

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Introduction

Whether we call it life or spirit, truth or reality, this, the essential thing, has moved off, or on, and refuses to be contained any longer in such ill-fitting vestments as we provide.¹

In her landmark essay 'Modern Fiction' (1925), Virginia Woolf (1882-1941) boldly criticizes leading novelists for writing of 'unimportant things' and spending immense skill and industry, 'making the trivial and the transitory appear the true and enduring' (NA 2410). She urges writers of fiction to strip their subjects of insignificant exterior details, and to explore instead their characters' inner realities and life's chaotic nature. In her opinion, the nation's leading writers are so constrained by the trappings of traditional fiction, for example an air of probability, that if all their figures 'were to come to life they would find themselves dressed down to the last button of their coats in the fashion of the hour.' Were the writer a free man, and not a slave to tradition, his writing would not contain such literary trimmings, 'and perhaps not a single button sewn on as the Bond Street tailors would have it' (NA 2411).

Having so ardently advocated the shedding of 'ill-fitting vestments;' the emblems of everything that needs be abolished in fiction, it might seem paradoxical that clothing is a leading motif in Woolf's fiction, as manifested in strikingly wrought characters such as the fashionable socialite Clarissa Dalloway, impoverished Doris Kilman, overbearing Mrs Ramsay, dowdy Mabel Waring and androgynous Orlando. Importantly, by her

¹ Virginia Woolf, 'Modern Fiction', in *Norton Anthology of English Literature*, ed. M. H. Abrams (London: Norton, 2001), 2410. All further references in the text (in parentheses) are to this edition, abbreviated NA.

polemic, she was by no means rejecting the significance of clothing as literary motif.

What she was rejecting was its application as simply a realistic detail.

Woolf was at the forefront of the modernist movement, which flourished in the first decades of the 20th century, encompassing every field of artistic expression. Instead of the real and the factual, modernists concerned themselves with perception and their subjects' inner life, representing a self-conscious break with traditional forms and subject matter. They searched for a distinctly contemporary mode of expression fuelled by World War I and its prevailing sense of fragmentation and disillusion, as well as self-awareness, introspection and openness to the unconscious and to humanity's darker fears and instincts.²

In Woolf's fiction, clothing would therefore serve as a gateway to her characters' inner realities; it would expose rather than conceal, evoking deep-rooted feelings often triggered by public scrutiny. Furthermore, while serving as the ultimate marker for social status, clothing would reveal suffering and guilt all across the class levels; an issue uniting and at the same time dividing women. Last but not least, Woolf would use clothing to skilfully create poignant metaphors, attacking gender inequality and warfare, both matters close to her heart.

What makes Woolf's application of clothing in her fiction even more interesting is the clothes-complex she harboured all her life, unequivocally influencing and interfering with her work. As excerpts from her diaries and autobiographical essays demonstrate, this complex was principally caused by her traumatic upbringing, characterized by Victorian taboos associated with body and dress, and the mental and physical molestation she suffered at the hands of her older half-brother George Duckworth.

² *Merriam-Webster's Encyclopaedia of Literature* (Springfield: Merriam-Webster, 1995), 770.

As pointed out by Laura Gwyn Edson, this trend towards abstraction by means of clothing also manifested itself in the visual arts, in Post-Impressionist formalism, which undoubtedly inspired Woolf and her fellow members of the Bloomsbury Group, the eccentric and controversial collective of brilliant writers, painters and designers. In *The Conversation* (1908-10), Matisse used the flatness of the artist's prison-stripped pyjamas to suggest domestic tensions; in Picasso's portrait *Ambroise Vollard* (1910) the model's business suit has been fractured into unrecognizable shingles.³ Similarly, the cluttered window dressings of the Edwardian period were replaced by the high theatrics of window dressing around core ideas.⁴ Last but not least, women's clothing was revolutionized in the century's first two decades, with light, free flowing and shorter dresses, confluent with the body, replacing painfully restrictive corsets and caged crinolines.⁵

The following is an exploration of Woolf's application of clothing and fashion as motifs in her renowned novels *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), *To the Lighthouse* (1927) and *Orlando: A Biography* (1928) and her short stories 'The New Dress' and 'Mrs Dalloway in Bond Street.' It will be argued that because Woolf was, from her childhood onwards, fascinated by clothes and fashion, this led to a profound influence on her life and work, especially in themes such as gender, power and class, that can be discerned and evaluated in the aforementioned works in particular.

³ Laura Gwyn Edson, 'Kicking off her Knickers: Virginia Woolf's Rejection of Clothing as Realistic Detail,' in *Virginia Woolf and the Arts: Selected Papers from the Sixth Annual Conference on Virginia Woolf*, eds. Diane F. Gillespie and Leslie K. Hankins (New York: Pace UP, 1997), 120.

⁴ William Leach, *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power and the Rise of New American Culture*. (New York: Random House, 1994), 81. Quoted in Edson, 120.

⁵ See e.g. Charlotte Seeling, *Fashion: The Century of the Designer* (1999; Köln: Könemann, 2000), pp. 85-97.

But first, Woolf's self-confessed clothes-complex will be investigated by means of her diaries and autobiographical sketches, accounting for her adolescence during the Victorian era and up until the period in which she wrote for British *Vogue*, inspiring her intriguing term 'frock consciousness.'

From Victorianism to *Vogue*: Virginia Woolf's Clothes-Complex

But I must remember to write about my *clothes* next time I have an impulse to write. My love of clothes interests me profoundly: only it is not love; & what it is I must discover.

- Virginia Woolf, May 1925⁶

For Virginia Woolf, the 1920s were in many ways a period of consolidation. She was establishing an identity as a respected writer and finally earning substantial money of her own. She conducted an active social life, was exploring new aspects of her sexuality and was paying more attention to her appearance than ever before. She even wrote steadily for British *Vogue*, a magazine best known for its reports of metallic dresses, bobbed hair, rouged lips and glamorous parties. Between 1922 and 1926, a link existed between the highbrow literary circles and the glamorous fashion world in the form of Dorothy Todd, the magazine's editor-in-chief, who made it her mission to bring together fashion, design, theatre, music, and literature, celebrating modernism in all its manifestations.⁷

Intellectually powerful but at the same time concerned with her appearance and immersed in the superficial world of fashion and parties, Woolf found herself torn between conflicting traditionally gender-assigned spheres. As a twentieth century feminist, she had inherited a variety of negative assumptions and guilt pertaining to

⁶ Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Anne Olivier Bell (1978; London: Penguin, 1988), III 21. All further references to this text (in parentheses) are to this edition, abbreviated D I-V.

⁷ Hermione Lee, *Virginia Woolf* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996), 463.

femininity and the feminine, including the belief of many progressives that fashion was nothing else than women's bondage made visible.⁸

The above excerpt from her diary, written in 1925, is an indication of this clash. In the same year, she laments: 'Compliments, clothes, building, photography – it is for these reasons that I cannot write *Mrs Dalloway*' (D II, 190). Similarly, in February four years earlier she had pondered during a holiday. 'More & more do I become in a state of undress,' she comments. 'I believe this affects my writing – or is it the other way about.' (D II, 90). 'I went to buy clothes today & was struck by my own ugliness... I can never look like other people – too broad, tall, flat, with hair hanging. And now my neck is so ugly,' she complains, seeking comfort in the intellectual sphere: 'My brain is ferociously active, I want to have at my books' (D III, 132). Obviously closely linked to femininity and appearance, these passages reveal that for Woolf, clothing constituted a constant preoccupation, preventing her from but at the same time compelling her to write. Therefore, in her fiction, she was constantly examining the conventionally established equation of femininity, consumption, and reading on the one hand, and masculinity, production, and writing on the other.⁹

Perhaps the definitive manifestation of this clash is Woolf's 'dress complex; suspenders complex in particular,' as described in her autobiographical essay 'A Sketch of the Past.' Attending a meeting of important literary figures, she recalls arriving far

⁸ Elizabeth Wilson, 'All the Rage,' in *Fabrications: Costume and the Female Body*, ed. Jane Gaines and Charlotte Herzog. (London: Routledge, 1990), 29. Quoted in Kathryn S. Laing, 'Addressing Femininity in the Twenties: Virginia Woolf and Rebecca West on Money, Mirrors and Masquerade,' in *Virginia Woolf and the Arts: Selected Papers from the Sixth Annual Conference on Virginia Woolf*, ed. Diane F. Gillespie and Leslie K. Hankins (New York: Pace UP, 1997), 69.

⁹ Tania Modleski, 'Femininity as Mas(s)querade: a feminist approach to culture,' *High Theory/Low Culture: Analysing Popular Television and Film*, ed. Colin MacCabe. (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1986), 41. Quoted in Laing, 66.

more concerned with her appearance as a woman than with her reputation as a writer. She had been invited to such a gathering numerous times, always declining as it meant another shopping trip.

I hate being badly dressed; but I hate buying clothes. In particular I hate buying suspenders. It is partly, I think, that in order to buy suspenders you must visit the most private room in the heart of a shop; you must stand in your chemise. Shiny black satin women prey and snigger. Whatever the confession reveals, and I suspect it is something discreditable, I am very shy under the eyes of my own sex when in my chemise. ... My suspenders were old; and I could not face buying another pair – let alone hat and coat.¹⁰

More than an ordinary interest, Woolf's relationship with clothing was indeed more of an obsession, a crippling fear, weighing on her daily life as well as her writing. According to her nephew and biographer Quentin Bell, she 'really more than half wanted to be invisible. The whole business of clothes was a nightmare to her; and she was happiest when she could forget that anyone looked at her.' She was moreover a 'vague, undecided and exasperating shopper' who 'must have reduced many poor shop assistants to the verge of blasphemy or of tears, and not only they but her companions suffered intensely when she found herself brought to a standstill by the difference between that which she had imagined and that which in fact was offered for sale.'¹¹

¹⁰ Virginia Woolf, *Moments of Being*, ed. Jeanne Schulkind (London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976), 188-189. All further references to this text (in parentheses) are to this edition, abbreviated MOB.

¹¹ Quentin Bell, *Virginia Woolf: A Biography*, 2 vols (1972; London: Hogarth Press, 1990), Vol II, 137, Vol I, 149.

Fashion, Fear and ‘Frock Consciousness’

In the 1920s, Dorothy Todd featured prominently in Woolf’s life, often assuming the apparently much-needed role of a stylist, alongside her lover, *Vogue*’s fashion editor Madge Garland, who remembered seeing Woolf for the first time ‘wearing what could only be described as ... an upturned waste-paper basket on her head.’¹² In May 1926, Woolf wrote in her diary about an imminent visit to a dressmaker, an event, which unbeknownst to her fashionable friends, absolutely terrified her.

And I am involved in dress buying with Todd; I tremble & shiver all over at the appalling magnitude of the task I have undertaken – to go to a dressmaker recommended by Todd, even, she suggested, but here my blood ran cold, with Todd. (D III, 78)

In addition to these passages, Woolf’s diary, spanning twenty-five years, is saturated with confessions of clothes-related dread. ‘All because I have to buy myself a dress this afternoon, & can’t think what I want, I cannot read’ (D III, 296); ‘Obscurely, I have my clothes complex to deal with. When I am asked out my first thought is, but I have no clothes to go in (D III, 81); she must conquer her ‘profound trepidation about ... clothes. “I won’t wear my new dress, I said, in case I should be laughed at.”’ (D IV, 104); ‘How I hate Bond Street & spending money on clothes’ (D IV, 103), she complains yet again.

Constantly feeling like an outsider in a world of glamour, frocks and parties, again Woolf confronted her dress complex, expressing a wish to apply it in her fiction. In April

¹² Lee, 563.

1925, after posing for *Vogue* for the feature ‘We Nominate for the Hall Of Fame’¹³

wearing her late mother’s Victorian dress, she wrote:

But my present reflection is that people have any number of states of consciousness: & I should like to investigate the party consciousness, the frock consciousness &c. The fashion world ... is certainly one; where people secrete an envelope which connects them & protects them from others, like myself, who am outside the envelope, foreign bodies. These states are very difficult (obviously I grope for words) but I’m always coming back to it. ... Still I cannot get at what I mean. (D III, 12-13)

The term ‘frock consciousness’ is both peculiar and puzzling. As Cohen aptly points out, it is an oxymoron, the first word referring to a winsome sheath, something for the outside, while the second describes the quality of mind and spirit we imagine inhabits our insides. But clothes both constitute a border and suggest its permeability. They lie between what we understand to be public space (the social world at large), and what we consider private (the body of an individual), both challenging and depending on this distinction.¹⁴ In addition, by choosing the verb *secrete*, Woolf defines the frocks of the fashionable people as a natural extension of their body, underlining that a sense of style is in her opinion innate.

As a leading modernist, Woolf’s signature style was a poetic stream of consciousness, constantly moving between action and contemplation, retrospect and anticipation. Whereas until that point in time, clothing had principally served as a moral,

¹³ Lisa Cohen, “‘Frock Consciousness’: Virginia Woolf, the Open Secret and the Language of Fashion,” *Fashion Theory* 3:2 (1999), 165.

¹⁴ Cohen, 150.

economic or social literary marker, Woolf dressed her characters in clothing, which would reveal their inner realities. Clothing was thus no longer merely a covering but a gateway to their psychological depths. She recognized that fashion, as well as being ephemeral and *of the moment*, it also had strong affinities with the modernist concept of *the moment*.¹⁵ She appreciated clothing's potential as a literary tool, as an interface between the exterior and the interior, the body and the psyche. As already stated, she did not focus on the cut or the style of the garment per se. Instead, she explored what wearing a particular garment made her characters experience; what deep-rooted emotions it evoked, often varying whether in the private or the public sphere; how her characters' self-worth was reflected in the eyes of other people who functioned as distorted mirrors because of their self-esteem and self-image. Also a manifestation of financial status and class, clothing thus served as a connection to others privy to the code of fashion, as well as protection from the outsiders, the foreign bodies.

Satin, Seed-Pearls and Society's Shackles

Scenes from Woolf's formative years contain crucial clues to understanding her severe clothes-complex. A child of the austere Victorian era, she was a sensitive girl with a shattered self-image, tormented by feelings of shame and guilt, directly associated with dress. She was born into a prestigious upper class literary family, the daughter of Julia and Sir Leslie Stephen. Having both been widowed, they each had children from previous marriages in addition to Vanessa, Thoby, Virginia and Adrian. The siblings' existence took a drastic turn for the worse at the untimely passing of Julia, soon followed by Sir Leslie, at which point their half-brother George Duckworth became their guardian. A

¹⁵ Cohen, 150.

stickler for convention, he placed enormous emphasis on dressing up for dinner every evening and keeping up appearances in London's high society. While Adrian and Thoby were away at Cambridge, the girls were educated at home, at 22 Hyde Park Gate, Kensington, spending their days in comfortable gender-free overalls, reading Latin and Greek, as Woolf recalls in 'A Sketch of the Past.'

But in the evening society had it all its own way. At 7.30 we went upstairs to dress. However cold or foggy it might be, we slipped off our day clothes and stood shivering in front of washing basins. Neck and arms had to be scrubbed, for we had to come into the drawing room at 8 o'clock in evening dress: arms and neck bare. Dress and hair-doing became far more important than pictures and Greek. I would stand in front of George's Chippendale glass trying to make myself not only tidy but presentable. On an allowance of fifty pounds it was difficult, even for the skilful, to be well dressed of an evening. (MOB 130)

The adolescent girls' existence was thus split into two clashing realities: the safe, private sphere of overalls and intellectuality and the excruciating public sphere of parties, dressed up in white satin and seed-pearls. The socially inept Woolf later described those excruciating evenings as 'wrangles', 'efforts' 'often humiliations' (MOB 135). She had no small talk and was constantly afraid of saying the wrong thing. 'I felt myself struggling like a fly in glue,' she recalls. 'I felt that if one said things one thought, anything beyond the usual patter, glue stuck to one's feet' (MOB 134).

These descriptions of fastidious dressing up and hairdressing convey claustrophobia, an imprisonment by social conventions and masculine rule. Notably, a part of Woolf's ritualistic ordeal is standing in front of her half-brother's expensive

Chippendale mirror, attempting to look presentable, terrified by his scrutinizing gaze. Contributing to Woolf's predicament was an insubstantial budget. However, armed with an artistic streak, she bravely attempted to circumvent the standard dress code. In a harrowing description, she remembers how, quite pleased with herself, she comes down to dinner one night wearing a dress

made of a green stuff bought erratically at a furniture shop ... because it was cheaper than dress stuff; also more adventurous. Down I came: in my green evening dress ... and there was George, in his black tie and evening jacket, ... He fixed on me that extraordinary observant ... gaze with which he always inspected clothes. ... He looked me up and down as if [I] were a horse turned into the ring. Then the sullen look came over him; a look in which one traced not merely aesthetic disapproval; but something that went deeper; morally, socially, he scented some kind of insurrection; of defiance of social standards. I was condemned from many more points of view than I can analyse as I stood there, conscious of those criticisms; and conscious too of fear, of shame and of despair – 'Go and tear it up', he said at last, in that curiously rasping and peevish voice which expressed his serious displeasure at this infringement of a code that meant more to him than he would admit. (MOB 130)

By rejecting Woolf's green dress made from cheap upholstery fabric, George Duckworth symbolically discarded her creativity; her feeble yet brave attempt to circumvent the code of fashion, the code of society. His scrutinizing gaze and judgment were all-powerful in her secluded world; her dress proved to be not a covering as much as a blatant exposure of failure.

In another autobiographical sketch, '22 Hyde Park Gate', Woolf ventures further and reveals a much darker side of George. She describes how he consistently sexually molested her, as this example demonstrates.

I went up to my room, took off my beautiful white satin dress ... Was it really possible that tomorrow I should ... go on spelling out the dialogues of Plato with Miss Case? I felt I knew much more about the dialogues of Plato than Miss Case could ever do. I felt old and experienced and disillusioned and angry, amused and excited, full of mystery, alarm and bewilderment. In a confused whirlpool of sensation I stood slipping off my petticoats, withdrew my long white gloves, and hung my white silk stockings over the back of a chair. Many different things were whirling round in my mind – diamonds and countesses, copulations, the dialogues of Plato, Mad Dick Popham and 'The Light of the World'. And, how pleasant it would be to stretch out in bed, fall asleep and forget them all! ... Then ... the door opened; ... someone entered. "Who?" I cried. "Don't be frightened", George whispered, "And don't turn on the light, oh beloved. Beloved –" and he flung himself on my bed, and took me in his arms. Yes, the old ladies of Kensington and Belgravia never knew that George Duckworth was not only father and mother, brother and sister to those poor Stephen girls; he was their lover also. (MOB 155)

These gruelling scenes from Woolf's childhood highlight the way in which dress, shame, guilt and sexuality were forcibly intertwined in the susceptible girl's mind, shaping her mental and physical condition in various ways. Moreover, it makes the fact that she must

wear fashionable white satin dresses and seed-pearls – the very emblems of purity and innocence – all the more ironic.

In 1904, the four siblings finally escaped their half-brother, setting up house in Bloomsbury and laying the foundation for the legendary Bloomsbury Group. There, Woolf finally found an unfettered outlet for her creative talent. Importantly, not dressing up was a key part in that newfound freedom. In ‘Old Bloomsbury’ Woolf triumphantly recalls receiving for the first time Thoby’s Cambridge friends and future Bloomsbury Group members, Lytton Strachey and Clive Bell; how she and Vanessa were ‘not wearing white satin or seed-pearls; [they] were not dressed at all’ (MOB 167). ‘All that tremendous encumbrance of appearance and behaviour which George had piled upon [their] first years vanished completely’ (MOB 169); The young men’s ‘lack of physical splendour, this shabbiness’ was in her eyes a proof of their superiority and in fact ‘reassuring; for it meant that things could go on like this ... without dressing for dinner, and never revert to the ways, which [she] had come to think so distasteful, at Hyde Park Gate’ (MOB 170).

In the following years, the Bloomsbury Group continued to outrage high society. In 1912, Virginia and Vanessa attended the Ball celebrating the second Post-Impressionistic exhibition dressed up as the colourful and scantily clad Polynesian girls depicted in the works of French painter Paul Gauguin, scandalizing society ladies by being ‘practically naked,’ with stories beginning to ‘circulate about parties at which [they] all undressed in public’ (MOB 179). The *Dreadnought Hoax*, discussed later in this essay, was an even bolder instance of clothes- and costume-related rebellion. Even so, as has the pressure of

clothes would remain with Woolf for the rest of her life, providing a constant inspiration for her writing of fiction.

Theory, Shame and Scrutiny in ‘The New Dress’

Woolf’s deepest exploration of her term frock consciousness is a short, yet complex story tellingly entitled ‘The New Dress’. In her notes on the story’s manuscript version, its key issues are immediately made evident.

At Mrs D’s party
She got it on this theory
The theory of clothes
But very little money
This brings in the relation with
Sex; her estimate of herself.¹⁶

Published in 1927, this was the first of eight short stories following *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), which will be analyzed in the next chapter. Collectively known as *Mrs Dalloway’s Party*, the stories all represent, from the perspective of one or two characters, the subtle tensions distinguishing party consciousness from frock consciousness during Clarissa’s party.¹⁷ ‘The New Dress’ addresses the tormented interiority of Mabel Waring, a middle-aged homemaker of limited means who attends Clarissa’s party wearing a yellow Empire dress, commissioned especially for the occasion. Looking around at the fashionably dressed guests, she realizes her *faux pas* and succumbs to feelings of inferiority, vowing never to give clothes another thought.

¹⁶ Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway’s Party*, ed. Stella McNichol (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973), 14. Quoted in Cohen, 152.

¹⁷ Susan Dick, ‘Introduction’ to Virginia Woolf, *Virginia Woolf: The Complete Shorter Fiction*, ed. Susan Dick (London: Triad Grafton, 1987), 10.

In addition to its telling title, the protagonist's last name further highlights the relationship between dress and identity. Here, as Cohen points out, frock consciousness is a version of the pre-eminently modernist mode of perception that Woolf referred to as 'moments of being' (MOB 70). Ironically, Cohen continues, this particular story's heightened experience comes from wearing something *not* of the moment, an outfit that is resolutely, consciously outmoded.

There is an exhaustingly small space dividing proper femininity from its failure, and separating fashionability from its parodic demise. The point also has to do with the temporality of fashion, its reliance on the present moment. Mabel's frock consciousness, moreover, exposes how the ineffabilities of taste are both a function of class and often passed off as part of the natural order.¹⁸

Notably, Woolf's mortification caused by her infringing green dress bears a strong resemblance to Mabel's experience. Firstly, in the same way that Woolf's insubstantial budget presented an obstacle, it is indeed a determining factor in Mabel's predicament, undermining her self-esteem and chances of prevailing long before she arrives at the party. Immediately upon receiving Clarissa's invitation, she thinks about her hopeless situation. 'She could not be fashionable. It was absurd to pretend it even – fashion meant cut, meant style, meant thirty guineas at least.'¹⁹ In her opinion, fashion, money and style are inextricably linked and she feels as an outsider, a foreign body.

Nonetheless, Mabel musters the courage to choose a different path: to be original and attempt to circumvent the fashion code. Much more in tune with her intellectual way

¹⁸ Cohen, 153-54.

¹⁹ Virginia Woolf, 'The New Dress' (1927), in *Virginia Woolf: The Complete Shorter Fiction*, ed. Susan Dick (London: Triad Grafton, 1987), 232. All further references in the text (in parentheses) are to this edition, abbreviated CSF.

of thinking, she decides to commission an Empire dress from her mother's old Parisian fashion book feeling 'how much prettier, more dignified and womanly they were then' (CSF 232). The world of literature, idealism and theory is indeed her comfort zone. During her excruciating stay at the party, she clings to her dignity by retreating to the pleasure she retrieves from reading the works of – notably male – writers; 'Tags of Shakespeare, lines from books she had read ages ago, suddenly came to her when she was in agony, and she repeated them over and over again' (CSF 233). Earlier during the party Mabel had thought about how good it felt to immerse herself in the works of 'Borrow and Scott' (CSF 231) presumably referring to romantic novelist and travel writer George Borrow (1803-1881) and historical novelist and poet Sir Walter Scott (1771-1832).²⁰

Not able to afford a high-end dressmaker, Mabel turns to Miss Milan whose 'little workroom was really terribly hot, stuffy, sordid,' smelling of 'clothes and cabbage cooking;

and yet, when Miss Milan put the glass in her hand, and she looked at herself with the dress on, finished, an extraordinary bliss shot through her heart.

Suffused with light, she sprang into existence. Rid of cares and wrinkles, what she had dreamed of herself was there – a beautiful woman. Just for a second ... there looked at her, framed in the scrolloping mahogany, a grey-white, mysteriously smiling charming girl, the core of herself, the soul of herself; and it was not vanity only, not only self-love that made her think it good, tender, and true. (CSF 234)

In the privacy of Miss Milan's home/workroom, Mabel feels safe and springs to life. In *The Psychology of Clothes*, first published in 1930 by Woolf's Hogarth Press, J.

²⁰ *Merriam-Webster's Encyclopaedia of Literature*, 159, 1005.

C. Flügel wrote about the necessity of confluence for the successful extension of bodily self, in other words the illusion created when the mind fails to distinguish between the two, unconsciously attributing the extension of the total human figure, really due to the clothes, to the body that wears them.²¹ According to Carolyn Abbs, Woolf fully recognized this. Thus, when Mabel springs to life wearing her completed Empire dress, ‘the created energy is created by the tactile feel of the dress, bringing awareness and connectedness of the body. The body is the dress. The dress is movement: the mobile body is performativity due to the confluence of the dress and body.’²²

Despite the workroom’s apparent unpleasantness, it has, upon closer examination, a comforting, domestic atmosphere. Woolf further enhances this by making the smell of boiling cabbage, albeit unpleasant, contrast with the sterile superficiality of high-end ateliers. Simply put, Miss Milan exudes maternal qualities, which Woolf herself must have yearned for when she was having her green dress made, having recently lost her mother. Sacrificing herself, crawling at her feet with a red, swollen face, bulging eyes and mouth full of pins, Miss Milan lovingly shares with Mabel the creation of the romantic dress, endowing her with the confidence to shine at Clarissa Dalloway’s party.

The Looking Glass Shame

As has been demonstrated, Woolf’s confidence had soared after her creation of that inexpensive green dress, and then shattered as she entered the public sphere: the scrutiny of her brother George Duckworth. Exactly the same thing happens to Mabel as she enters Clarissa’s home wearing her Empire dress, made under the influence of creativity, theory

²¹ J. C. Flügel, *The Psychology of Clothes* (London: Hogarth Press, 1930), 37.

²² Carolyn Abbs, ‘Writing the Subject: Virginia Woolf and Clothes,’ *Colloquy: Text, Theory, Critique* 11 (2006), 222.

and originality. Having removed her protective layer, a twenty-year-old Chinese cloak, she becomes as vulnerable as squirming silk worms,²³ and realizes her *faux pas*.

Mabel had her first serious suspicion that something was wrong as she took her cloak off and Mrs Barnet, while handing her the mirror and touching the brushes and thus drawing her attention, perhaps rather markedly, to all the appliances for tidying and improving hair, complexion, clothes; which existed on the dressing-table, confirmed the suspicion – that it was not right, not quite right, which growing stronger as she went upstairs and springing at her with conviction as she greeted Clarissa Dalloway, she went straight to the far end of the room, to a shaded corner where a looking-glass hung and looked. No! It was not *right*.
(CSF 231)

As opposed to embracing Miss Milan's mirror, which projected an image she highly liked, she is unable to look into the mirror handed to her by Mrs Barnet, certain that it will only confirm her failure. Instead of its standard role of a covering, Mabel's Empire dress has been turned into a merciless exposure of her failure to circumvent the code of fashion. She feels the other guest's gaze upon her; feeling that they all are inwardly judging her.

[O]h these men, oh these women, all were thinking – 'What's Mabel wearing? What a fright she looks! What a hideous new dress!' – their eyelids flickering as they came up and then their lids shutting rather tight. (CSF 231)

As a consequence, she immediately succumbs to the misery, which she had always tried to hide, the profound dissatisfaction – the sense she had had, ever since she was a child, of being inferior to other people' and depressed by feelings of 'her own appalling

²³ Edson, 121.

inadequacy; her cowardice; her mean, water-sprinkled blood' (CSF 231). She feels that she deserves chastisement for 'pluming herself ... upon being modest and old-fashioned, and very charming, giving herself up ... to an orgy of self-love' (CSF 232). The guilt is double, both because of having demonstrated such great interest in her appearance and at the same time having failed so miserably to comply with the code of fashion. Her Empire dress is outmoded by a whole century; with its high waist, simple cut and floor-length hem, it is in screaming contrast to the fashionable dresses of the 1920s, with its shorter hemline, low waist, beading and layers of silks and chiffons.

Instead of looking into Mrs Barnet's mirror, Mabel escapes towards another mirror in a shaded corner.

But she dared not look in the glass. She could not face the whole horror – the pale yellow, idiotically old-fashioned silk dress with its long skirt and its high sleeves and its waist and all the things that looked so charming in the old fashion book, but not on her, not among all these ordinary people. She felt like a dressmaker's dummy standing there, for young people to stick pins into. (CSF 232)

Instead of facing herself, trying to recover that surge of happiness she experienced at Miss Milan's workshop, Mabel allows the other guests to reflect her worth, whose judgement corresponds with George's inspection, resulting in the symbolic destruction of the infringing green dress. The feel of their gaze, and the pain and shame that comes with it, is metaphorically conveyed by the dressmaker's pins. Again, as she issues out into the room, she feels 'as if spears were thrown at her yellow dress from all sides' (235).

Importantly, as Cohen points out, rather than making Mabel visible when she worries that everyone is judging her, Woolf puts the experience of her visibility of display – which ironically has a great deal to do with what *other* people look like. In other words, we don't see Mabel so much as we see her being seen.²⁴ The only way to determine the guests' reactions to her is via their marked gestures and flickering eyelids. A fundamental factor in her predicament is that Mabel's mind is distorted by lack of self-esteem, which at the party develops into full-blown paranoia. She deems Mrs Barnet's offers of the looking glass as spite and not helpfulness; she dismisses Rose Shaw's reassuring 'But my dear, it's perfectly charming' as sarcasm. Rose is 'dressed in the height of fashion, precisely like everybody else, always' (CSF 232). Robert Haydon responds to Mabel's self-pity with 'something quite polite,' which she interprets as 'Lies, lies, lies!' (CSF 233). Similarly, Charles Burt is 'malice itself' for not flattering her the way she hopes he will, mumbling instead 'Mabel's got a new dress!' (CSF 236).²⁵ According to Rachael Holmes, in society, the public sphere,

Mabel looks to Charles Burt, to the masculine for reassurance not only about her physical appearance, but about her identity as a woman, her female role and sexuality. When she perceives that the reassurance is withheld, her emotional dependency reverts back to the dream of her 'self' and the feminine sphere of Miss Milan.²⁶

²⁴ Cohen, 153.

²⁵ The character of Charles is probably based on Woolf's brother-in-law and Bloomsbury Group member Clive Bell who drove her to desperation by constantly ridiculing her attire. See e.g. Bell, Vol. II pp. 136-137.

²⁶ Rachael Holmes, 'Clothing and the Body: Motifs of Female Distress in Virginia Woolf and Katherine Mansfield,' *Virginia Woolf Bulletin* 3 (2000), 11.

Like a ship on raging seas, Mabel aimlessly drifts between the impeccably dressed guests, engaging in small talk and interpreting their reactions as yet another confirmation that her dress is a failure; that she is a failure. She feels like ‘some dowdy, decrepit, horribly dingy old fly’ while the other guests are ‘dragon-flies, butterflies, beautiful insects, dancing, fluttering, skimming’ (CSF 233), echoing Woolf’s previously mentioned party experiences. Mabel feels like an outsider and there is nothing she can do about because, it is what she deserves.

She knew ... that she was condemned, despised, left like this in a backwater, because of her being like this a feeble, vacillating creature; and it seemed to her that the yellow dress was a penance which she had deserved, and if she had been dressed like Rose Shaw, in lovely, clinging green with a ruffle of swansdown, she would have deserved that; and she thought that there was no escape for her – none whatever. (CSF 237-8)

Woolf’s autobiographical ‘A Sketch of the Past’ sheds further light on the relationship between shame, gender and clothing she harboured all her life. At Talland House, the Stephen family’s summer residence at St. Ives, there was a hallway mirror, which she, as a child of six or seven, got into the habit of looking at her face.

But I only did this if I was sure that I was alone. I was ashamed of it. A strong feeling of guilt seemed naturally attached to it. ... Vanessa and I were both what was called tomboys; that is, we played cricket, scrambled over rocks, climbed trees, were said not to care for clothes and so on. Perhaps therefore to have been found looking in the glass would have been against our tomboy code. ... [T]he looking-glass shame has lasted all my life; long after the tomboy phase was

over. I cannot now powder my nose in public. Everything to do with dress – to be fitted, to come into a room wearing a new dress – still frightens me; at least makes me shy, self-conscious, uncomfortable. ... Yet femininity was very strong in our family. We were famous for our beauty – my mother’s beauty, Stella’s beauty, gave me as early as I can remember, pride and pleasure. What then gave me this feeling of shame unless it were that I inherited some opposite instinct?

(MOB 68)

In this important passage, once again Woolf attempts to account for her fear of everything to do with dress, and the sense of shame she associates with the looking glass. Again, it is all about adhering to a code. Having been labelled a tomboy, the child found it impossible to infringe that image by demonstrating concern for her looks.

According to Abbs, in this passage, shame is like a torment imposed upon the body, exemplifying the confluence between body and dress. A torment, which can be linked to the shame that was imbedded in Woolf during her childhood and the molestation she endured. Her feelings (as the subject), Abbs continues, are expressed in a non-verbal manner (and indeed via clothes) in that the fear and shame is described in terms of the tactile; to be fitted; to be touched. In addition, the feeling of being observed is portrayed by movement of the body: ‘to come into a room’ as if with lowered eyes. In the same way, Mabel’s feelings are portrayed by nonverbal emotions and sensations.

The visual delineation is limited in that she does not look (in the glass) nor is the fact that she is being looked at defined in a verbal manner. Instead, it is the tactile that produces the feeling of a self and once again it is the bodily aspect of language that gives meaning. There is the tactile feeling of wearing the silk dress,

which could otherwise be sensual if the sensuality was not diminished by the lack of power which is signified as above by the lowering of the eyes that merely notices the 'long skirt.'²⁷

Therefore, as opposed to the happiness Mabel experienced with Miss Milan, at the party her dress is no longer confluent with her body, projecting shame and discomfort and making her wish to be invisible.²⁸

Eventually, Mabel has an epiphany, deciding to leave the party early, thereby permanently leaving the public sphere. Retreating back to her comfort zone of literature and theory, she envisages going to the London library and

finding some wonderful, helpful, astonishing book, quite by chance, a book by a clergyman, by an American no one had ever heard of; ... She would be absolutely transformed. She would wear a uniform; she would be called Sister Somebody; she would never give a thought to clothes again' (CSF 240).

Wearing a uniform and being called a Sister Somebody suggests the lifestyle of a nun, the ultimate example of a secluded woman rid of emblems suggesting sexuality or concern for appearances. As Laing rightly points out, Mabel's return to the private sphere can be seen as an act of retreat, reinforcing the equation of femininity with passivity, consumption and the inability to write.²⁹ Holmes similarly points out that

²⁷ Abbs, 220-21.

²⁸ A plethora of Woolf's characters have a complex relationship with mirrors, clothing and self-esteem. The short story 'The Lady in the Looking Glass: A Reflection' prescribes that 'people should not leave looking-glasses hanging in their rooms any more than they should leave open cheque books or letters confessing some hideous crime' (CSF 299). In *The Waves*, Jinny hates the small stairway mirror at her house. Finally, in *Between the Acts*, the fashionably challenged Isa looks inward while looking at herself in the mirror. Not only does the mirror show a single version of her but also indeed three separate ones.

²⁹ Laing, 69.

There will be no transformation, merely a covering up with time, a wrapping away of displacement, discomfort and disillusion. In a physical rather than verbal articulation of her emotion, Mabel has not been true to her 'self' and to her belief in the eminence of the intellect and the mind. Spuriously she has attempted a form of self-expression that has left her more vulnerable and in greater distress than when the party invitation to 'be fashionable' (CSF 232) arrived.³⁰

Whereas Mabel retreats to the private sphere of reading and consuming, Woolf herself went on to write and create, remaining in the public sphere and thereby rebelling against masculine authority. In fact, as a young girl, she did symbolically rebel against George's tyranny. One night at one of her endless parties, her undergarments dropped to her ankles. In a fluster, she swept up the layers of petticoats and knickers, and finding George at home, she entered the drawing room, 'flourishing the errant garments in his face', leaving him 'speechless with indignation,' writes Bell, explaining that she knew that while her social gaffes were embarrassing for her, it would be even more painful for him.³¹ That minor setback on her journey towards a career of creation, a principally masculine domain, only fortified her and forged her will to succeed and prove a shining example to other women as well.

³⁰ Holmes, 10-12.

³¹ Bell, Vol I, 79.

Mrs Dalloway

In this book I have almost too many ideas. I want to give life & death, sanity & insanity; I want to criticise the social system, & to show it at work, at its most intense.

(June 1923; D II, 248)

Published in 1925, Woolf's renowned novel *Mrs Dalloway* recounts a day in the life of charming middle-aged socialite Clarissa Dalloway, who during a summer's day makes preparations for yet another of her famous parties, all the while evaluating her life and the choices she has made. A not-so-satisfied wife of a Member of Parliament and a mother of a teenage daughter she struggles to connect with, over the course of the day her mind reflects on her happier, carefree youth and her friend Sally Seton for whom she harboured romantic feelings. In a parallel narrative, mentally ill war veteran Septimus Warren Smith wanders around London with his wife Rezia, a Milanese milliner, before he eventually commits suicide by jumping out of a window.

Woolf's diary reveals that while writing the novel, she struggled with the creation of Clarissa. 'The doubtful point is, I think, the character of Mrs Dalloway,' she worried. 'It may be too stiff, too glittering & tinselly' (D II, 272). It might seem surprising that the highbrow Woolf would have strived to favourably depict such a fashionable lady and member of the snobbish elite. In fact, Clarissa exemplifies the kind of people who Woolf and her Bloomsbury friends enjoyed satirizing. In the opinion of Phyllis Rose, the reason for Woolf's respect for Clarissa is that she represents the path not taken, and how like many untaken paths, it can look very appealing to the person who has chosen another

way. 'Although Clarissa may seem too privileged to be thought of as typical,' Rose argues, 'she represents Woolf's attempt to portray average humanity, with its potential for both triviality and transcendence.'³²

As the chapter's opening passage demonstrates, Woolf's objective with *Mrs Dalloway* was to address the insurmountable class divide, to expose and to criticize society. This, she would accomplish via the silent and intense struggle between the wealthy Clarissa and the impoverished Miss Kilman, her daughter Elizabeth's tutor. The barrier that divides the two women is manifested via their signature garments: a delicate designer gown and an austere mackintosh coat, respectively. Fortifying the contrast, both garments are green in colour.

Frocks, Frivolity and Fashion's Democratization

The highlight of Clarissa's busy day preparing for her party is confining herself in her bedroom and tending to the dress she will be wearing at her party.

Her evening dresses hung in the cupboard. Clarissa, plunging her hand into the softness, gently detached the green dress and carried it to the window. She had torn it. Someone had trod on the skirt. She had felt it give at the Embassy party at the top among the folds. By artificial light the green shone, but lost its colour now in the sun. She would mend it. Her maids had too much to do. She would wear it tonight. She would take her silks, her scissors, her – what was it? Her thimble, of course, down into the drawing-room... (MD 151)³³

³² Phyllis Rose, *Woman of Letters: The Life of Virginia Woolf* (1978; Guernsey: Guernsey Press, 1986), 150-52.

³³ Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway* (1925; in *Selected Works of Virginia Woolf*. London: Wordsworth, 2005), 151. All further references in the text (in parentheses) are to this edition, abbreviated MD.

Notably, despite her maid's insistence, she chooses to mend the torn garment herself, which clearly suggests its sentimental significance, which is about to be accounted for.

This was a favourite dress, one of Sally Parker's, the last almost she ever made, alas, for Sally had now retired, lived at Ealing ... she was a character, thought Clarissa, a real artist. She thought of little-out-of-the-way things; yet her dresses were never queer. You could wear them at Hatfield; at Buckingham Palace. She had worn them at Hatfield; at Buckingham Palace. (MD 152)

In other words, this particular dress is appropriate for every occasion, allowing Clarissa to stand out with its quirky details. Significantly, at the same time it ensures that she fits in, adhering to the all-important code of fashion, unlike for example poor Mabel Waring in her outmoded Empire dress.

This hand-made designer dress is a sign of an era that is coming to a close. Sally Parker is retiring, disappearing from view, a sign of the decline of custom-made clothing. In the first decades of twentieth century Europe, social status was no longer as easily discernible as it used to; the 'democratization of fashion'³⁴ had taken over with its vast department stores and mail order catalogues beginning to replace tailors and expensive dressmakers. Ready-to-wear clothing had come to be, meaning that women suddenly had *doubles* somewhere in the world, that is, other women wearing the exact same dress in the same colour and size. Women's increased participation in the workplace enabled them to afford quality clothing; industrialization, and a boom in manufacturing made clothing more accessible and affordable; the advent of cheap synthetic fabrics such as rayon tricked even the most discerning eye. As Pearl Binder points out, prior to World

³⁴ A phrase applied by Mark Gaipa in 'Accessorizing Clarissa: How Virginia Woolf Changes the Clothes and the Character of her Lady of Fashion,' *Modernist Cultures* 4 (2009), 25.

War I, 'a good silk dress marked out sharply one class from another, for only the rich could afford silk.' But now, fashion was no longer that 'knife used to draw a firm line between the noble by birth and the less so, the richer and the poorer.'³⁵ Clarissa's former lover Peter Walsh, having just returned from living in India, sums it up nicely thinking about the modern London women.

There was a freshness about them; even the poorest dressed better than five years ago surely; and to his eye the fashions had never been so becoming; the long black cloaks, the slimness; the elegance; and then the delicious and apparently universal habit of paint. Every woman, even the most respectable, had roses blooming under glass; lips cut with a knife; curls of Indian ink; there was design, art, everywhere; a change of some sort had undoubtedly taken place.' (MD 174)

Comfortably sitting in her drawing room, Clarissa finds mending her dress soothing and slips into an almost meditative state.

Quiet descended on her, calm, content, as her needle, drawing the silk smoothly to its gentle pause, collected the green folds together and attached them, very lightly, to the belt. ... Fear no more, says the heart. (MD 152)

By mending her dress she is, in a way, mending her heart and soul. Later, at her party, mirroring the wave-like motion of her sewing, she effortlessly floats around her home like a mermaid, escorting her Prime Minister,

prancing, sparkling, with the stateliness of her grey hair. She wore earrings, and a silver-green mermaid's dress. Lolloping on the waves and braiding her tresses she seemed, having that gift, still; to be; to exist; to sum it all up in the moment

³⁵ Pearl Binder, *Muffs and Morals* (New York: William Morrow, 1950), 129.

as she passed; turned, caught her scarf in some other woman's dress, unhitched it, laughed, all with the most perfect ease and air of a creature floating in its element. But age had brushed her; even as a mermaid might behold in her glass the setting sun on some very clear evening over the waves. (MD 237)

Despite endowing her with confidence, her feelings towards the dress are decidedly ambivalent as it also exemplifies her superficial lifestyle of dresses and parties in the wake of a devastating war. The dress, which noticeably only shines by artificial light, evokes guilt and shame. When unexpectedly visited by Peter, with whom she clearly has unresolved issues, she quickly makes to hide it 'like a virgin protecting chastity, respecting privacy' (MD 152), sitting with it 'upon her knee, and her needle held to the end of green silk, trembling a little' (MD 156). Therefore, the dress exposes Clarissa at the same time as it covers her. Reading from his facial expressions and body language – he is tilting his 'penknife towards her green dress' (MD 153) – she is fully aware that this uninvited visitor is silently judging her. And indeed, he is.

Here she is mending her dress; mending her dress as usual, he thought; here she's been sitting all the time I've been in India; mending her dress; playing about; going to parties ... So it is, so it is, he thought, shutting his knife with a snap. (MD 153)

According to Edson, Peter expresses disgust at the sight of Clarissa mending the dress because she has become the woman he feared. 'Fetishistically reviled by Peter for what it does/not cover,' the dress 'is presented as an elemental part of her and not just a temporary costume.' Moreover, as Edson rightly points out, his contempt for her,

‘expressed as response to her gown, covers a jealous impotency – his knife snaps shut over the dress.’³⁶

Clarissa finds Peter’s scrutiny exceedingly frustrating. ‘He’s very well dressed; yet he is always criticizing *me*’ (MD 153), she reflects, not finding it fair that he dismisses her as ‘too frivolous; empty-minded; a mere silly chatterbox’ (MD 155). She does not need another reminder of the superficiality of her lifestyle, epitomized by her pretentious parties.

Every time she gave a party she had this feeling of being something not herself, and that everyone was unreal in one way; much more real in another. It was, she thought, partly the clothes, partly being taken out of their ordinary ways, partly the background. (MD 235)

Peter’s criticism is thus in a way justified. But, as Michael Rosenthal explains, what Peter cannot understand is that her parties are so much more than merely social affairs. They are ‘attempts made to withstand life’s entropy by bringing people together to establish enclaves of order and communication against the silence and indifference separating everybody’.³⁷ In other words, Clarissa’s parties are attempts at unification and not separation.

Simply put, Clarissa is, like her designer dress, fragile, lovely and slightly torn. To her, conforming to the peculiar code of fashion, which entails fitting in yet standing out, means everything. However, she does realize the futility of it all. The main reason why Woolf has her mend her dress herself is because it represents the subsiding era of the

³⁶ Edson, 122.

³⁷ Michael Rosenthal, *Virginia Woolf* (New York: Columbia UP, 1979), 99-100.

custom-made and the advent of the ready-to-wear, abolishing clothing's traditional role as visible markers of elevated social status and wealth.

Poverty, Prayers and a Mackintosh Coat

Impoverished, unmarried Miss Kilman has been dealt a far worse hand in life than Clarissa. Having lost her position as a history teacher largely due to her German descent, Britain's enemy during the War, she attempts to make a living as Elizabeth Dalloway's tutor. Miss Kilman has found consolation in Christianity; her life is characterized by strict discipline and an utter rejection of everything frivolous and superficial, clothing in particular. She thus detests Clarissa, with her 'delicate body, her air of freshness and fashion' and she wishes to 'unmask' (MD 207) her. Although obviously meant metaphorically, masks are interesting because of their social aspects, as Flügel points out. If we are ourselves unmasked, we feel at a distinct disadvantage. When we wear a mask, we cease to some extent to be ourselves; we conceal from others both our identity and the natural expression of our emotions, and in consequence, we do not feel the same responsibility as when our faces are uncovered.³⁸

Most literary critics have not treated Miss Kilman with much kindness. According to Herbert Marder, what makes her such a detestable character is her 'lower-class vulgarity' and that consequently, even if Woolf struggled with her own dress-sense, her sympathy is on Clarissa's side because her snobbishness was 'slight compared to the gulf between her and those who remained on the other side of the class barrier.'³⁹ Similarly, Phyllis Rose dismisses Miss Kilman as 'singularly repulsive, fanatical, coercive,

³⁸ Flügel, 51.

³⁹ Herbert Marder, *Feminism and Art: A Study of Virginia Woolf* (1968; Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1974), 96.

destructive'; a 'masculine woman, aggressive, embittered by what she does not have.'⁴⁰

Jean E. Kennard on the other hand, comes to her defence, pertinently arguing that it is not her mannishness that Woolf is presenting negatively. Rather, she is demonstrating 'the desperation to which society has driven such a woman, a desperation that has warped her character. Doris Kilman ... is also a victim of the war.'⁴¹

The motif representing Miss Kilman's poverty and inferior class is her green mackintosh coat, which just like her is 'heavy, ugly, commonplace' (MD 207). Coming to fetch Elizabeth, she stands 'formidable upon the landing in her mackintosh' looking 'with steady and sinister serenity' (MD 207). This moment evokes in Clarissa feelings of discomfort and frustration. 'Why creeds and prayers and mackintoshes?' (MD 208) she exasperatedly wonders, underlining that all three elements are essential components of Miss Kilman's character.

[F]or Miss Kilman would do anything for the Russians, starved herself for the Austrians, but in private inflicted positive torture, so insensitive was she, dressed in a green mackintosh coat. Year in year out she wore that coat; she perspired; she was never in the room five minutes without making you feel her superiority, your inferiority; how poor she was; how rich you were; how she lived in a slum without a cushion or a bed or a rug or whatever it might be. (MD 134)

According to Rosenthal, although the human exploitation of wars and empire building has largely been the special privilege of the masculine world, the example of Miss Kilman shows that the Goddess Conversion is not a deity worshipped only by men.

⁴⁰ Rose, 147.

⁴¹ Jean E. Kennard, 'Power and Sexual Ambiguity: The *Dreadnought Hoax*, *The Voyage Out*, *Mrs. Dalloway* and *Orlando*,' *Journal of Modern Literature* 20:2 (1996), 159.

Perpetually swathed in her green mackintosh, Doris Kilman flaunts her poverty as proudly as the more fortunate might their elegance. The shapeless mackintosh successfully keeps the prying eyes of the world from glimpsing her body, and symbolizes the completeness with which Miss Kilman has closed herself off from life. But the renunciation of worldly pleasures has not kept her from desiring another kind of triumph: outwardly grateful to the Dalloways for the employment ... Miss Kilman seethes inwardly with the need to humiliate the gracious and lovely Clarissa. Having turned to the church some two year before as a refuge for her loneliness, Kilman wields her faith as a weapon to combat Clarissa's charm. Her spiritual certitude enables her to see Clarissa's beauty as a sign of her triviality and her own plainness as a clear evidence of a moral ascendancy. Clarissa may indeed be able to give successful parties and wear attractive clothes, but what need has she for such frivolities when her soul is so much grander? The splendour of Kilman's belief permits her to pity Clarissa instead of envying her, but even pitying her is not sufficient. She must subjugate her altogether, and in God's name, not her own.⁴²

Further solidifying this argument is the fact that, according to Flügel, in psychology, clothing is a recognized means of protection. Certain garments can become symbolic of an inflexibility of character, severity of moral standards and purity of moral purpose. Clothing helps avoiding distracting influences that might lead them away from the straight and narrow path of virtue. The ultimate examples of this are the robes of monks and nuns. To be of service to this end, he comments, clothing must be ample,

⁴² Rosenthal, 96.

thick, tight, stiff, or unprovocative in colour; or, better still, possess several or all of these qualities.⁴³

However, even though she comes off as self-assured and resolutely pious, Miss Kilman still feels the need to internally justify her lacklustre mackintosh coat. She is fully aware of the fact that it is a blatant manifestation of her poverty and worthlessness.

Yes, Miss Kilman stood on the landing, and wore a mackintosh; but had her reasons. First, it was cheap; second, she was over forty; and did not, after all, dress to please. She was poor, moreover; degradingly poor. Otherwise she would not be taking jobs from people like the Dalloways. (MD 206)

Succinctly put by R. S. Koppen, Miss Kilman wears her coat as ‘a stamp, a reminder to herself and others of the indignities inflicted upon her by gender, age and class, of being a woman, over forty, and poor. Unable to afford the protection of fashion’s levelling cloak, dress to her takes the form of painful exposure of the wound.’⁴⁴

After the doorway encounter, Miss Kilman is indeed filled with painful feelings of wounded pride.

Clarissa Dalloway had insulted her. That she expected. But she had not triumphed; she had not mastered the flesh. Ugly, clumsy, Clarissa Dalloway had laughed at her for being that; and had revived the fleshy desires, for she minded looking as she did beside Clarissa. Nor could she talk as she did. But why wish to resemble her? Why? She despised Mrs Dalloway from the bottom of her heart. She was not serious. She was not good. Her life was a tissue of vanity and deceit. Yet Doris Kilman had been overcome. (MD 209)

⁴³ Flügel, 74.

⁴⁴ R. S. Koppen, *Virginia Woolf, Fashion and Literary Modernity* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2009), 31.

Again referring to Flügel, Miss Kilman's coat can also be seen as a protection against the general unfriendliness of the world as a whole; or, expressed more psychologically, a reassurance against the lack of love. We withdraw into our clothes like a tortoise withdraws its head into the protecting armour with which nature has provided it. Moreover, there is definite evidence that in certain individuals a period of depression, anxiety, loneliness, or homesickness may coincide with a desire to be more warmly clad than usual. Clothes can therefore be a substitute for love.⁴⁵ Indeed, Miss Kilman is extremely displeased with her

unlovable body which people could not bear to see. Do her hair as she might, her forehead remained like an egg, bald, white. No clothes suited her. She might buy anything. And for a woman, of course, that meant never meeting the opposite sex. Never would she come first with anyone. (MD 209)

To sum up, Miss Kilman's bland mackintosh coat is a revelation of her poverty and low social status. It is an inextricable aspect of her character; of her chosen lifestyle of piousness and discipline, tinged with conflicted emotions of envy and pity towards Clarissa who is wealthier and therefore dresses better. Finally, as hopefully has been demonstrated, as a motif, clothing can serve both as a guide to morality as well as a substitute for love.

***Ressentiment* and Fashion's Double Bind**

Woolf's interest in the impassable class-barrier is evident as early as January 1915, at which time she expressed in her diary apprehension regarding the public's lack of empathy and openness. 'As it is, an appeal to feel together is hopelessly muddled by

⁴⁵ Flügel, 80-81.

intervening greatcoats & fur coats' preventing people from being 'stirred by universal emotions' (D I, 5). In other words, due to the rigid class system, people's perspectives are simply incompatible. Deirdre Flynn addresses this silent divisiveness of clothing, pointing out that the two kinds of coats connote social and economic barriers that block hopes of an inclusive conversation among classes. Less expensive, heavy overcoats signal a middle-to-lower-middle-class social body, whereas more expensive fur coats mark an upper-class body. Such coded attire, Woolf laments, veils the common core beneath it, dividing people superficially but 'hopelessly.'⁴⁶

The class barrier continued to weigh heavily on Woolf's mind, with people belonging to all levels suffering for it. In May 1930, she was asked to pen a preface to a collection of accounts of impoverished working-class women who went into domestic service or became factory workers or miners' wives, and finally became politically active by means of the Women's Co-operative Guild movement. The preface was in the form of a candid letter to the book's editor, Margaret Llewelyn Davies, in which she recalls her experience of a rally organized by Davies in 1913. Woolf's certainty that the rally would show no results was 'irritating and depressing in the extreme,' she writes, remembering sitting there 'hypocritically clapping and stamping, an outcast from the flock.'⁴⁷

Our sympathy is fictitious, not real. Because the baker calls and we pay our bills with cheques, and our clothes are washed for us ... we are condemned to remain forever shut up in the confines of the middle classes, wearing tail coats and silk

⁴⁶ Deirdre Flynn, 'Virginia Woolf's Women and the Fashionable Elite: On Not Fitting In,' in *Virginia Woolf and Communities*, eds. J. McVicker and L. Davis. (New York: Pace UP, 1999), 168.

⁴⁷ Virginia Woolf, 'Introductory Letter' to *Life as We Have Known It*, ed. Margaret Llewelyn Davies (1931; New York; Norton Library, 1975), xix.

stockings ... And they remain equally deprived. ... But the barrier is impassable.⁴⁸

Notably, Woolf feels just as excluded belonging to the upper class. Moreover, in her opinion, all those years later writing the preface, the situation has not improved and she experiences profound guilt and sadness. After all, these women's lives, and their voices, are just as valuable as those of upper-class women who never have to work a day in their life. In short, Woolf harboured sympathy for the lower classes and abhorred the class barrier hopelessly separating the two.

As has been established, the signature garments of Clarissa and Miss Kilman metonymize their respective social standings; they are essential parts of their identities. According to Flynn, clothing signals clear positions of dominance and subservience, generating the animosity the two women share. Miss Kilman's poverty thus not only limits her to a coat, but also enslaves her to the richer classes.

The fashionable Mrs Dalloway enjoys membership in an idealized, dominant group, while the unfashionable Miss Kilman suffers ostracism in a deidealized, inferior group. Clothing thus defines a social group and communicates a group identity.⁴⁹

However, clothing also has an ideological function, Flynn continues, pointing to Malcolm Barnard who argues that clothing and fashion are part of the process by which social groups establish, sustain and reproduce positions of power, relations of dominance and subservience. 'These positions of dominance and subservience,' Barnard continues, 'are made to appear entirely natural, proper and legitimate ... not only to those in positions of

⁴⁸ Woolf, xxviii.

⁴⁹ Flynn, 168.

dominance, but also to those in positions of subservience.’⁵⁰ Therefore, Flynn explains, by sporting elaborate outfits at such elegant places as Hatfield and Buckingham Palace, Clarissa and other socialites such as herself, visually assert their socio-political dominance, even making it seem proper and natural. Poorer women, such as Miss Kilman, and Sally Parker, serve them and having accepted their inferior status, ‘they then hide away from view, in ‘the Abbey’ (MD 212) or ‘at Ealing’ (MD 152).⁵¹

Moreover, Flynn points out, clothing continues to assert positions of superiority and inferiority even when they are out of sight or disrobed. As a matter of fact, even when removing all visible elements of rank, women’s status remains. She argues that despite Clarissa’s awareness that ‘Women must put off their rich apparel. At midday they must disrobe’ (MD 147), ‘Clothing seems, in effect, to get under women’s skins, internally pinning them to specific social ranks. Moreover, it does so even when women are aware and critical of its divisive power,’⁵² which Woolf’s aforementioned experience at the Women’s Guild rally exemplifies.

Wendy Brown discusses Nietzsche’s concept of *ressentiment*, the moralizing revenge of the powerless, ‘the triumph of the weak as weak.’⁵³ Suffering from failure or guilt, all liberal subjects are vulnerable to some strain of *ressentiment*. The paradox between individual liberty and social egalitarianism produces failure turned to recrimination by the subordinated, and guilt turned to resentment by the ‘successful’. This failure must find either a reason within itself (which redoubles the failure) or a site

⁵⁰ Malcolm Barnard, *Fashion as Communication*. (London: Routledge, 1996), 40. Quoted in Flynn, 169.

⁵¹ Flynn, 169.

⁵² Flynn, 169.

⁵³ William Connolly, *Identity/Difference: Democratic Negotiations of Political Paradox*. (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1991). Quoted in Wendy Brown, ‘Wounded Attachments,’ *Political Theory* 21:3 (1993), 400.

of external blame on which to avenge its hurt and redistribute the pain. *Ressentiment* produces an affect (rage, righteousness) that overwhelms the hurt, produces a culprit and a site of revenge to displace the hurt.

Miss Kilman's failure is indeed made evident via clothing. She is extremely awkward when shopping for clothes, especially something as intimate as a petticoat.

Up they went. Elizabeth guided her this way and that; guided her in her abstraction as if she had been a great child, an unwieldy battleship. There were the petticoats, brown, decorous, striped, frivolous, solid, flimsy; and she chose, in her abstraction, portentously, and the girl serving thought her mad. (MD 210)

Also, as already mentioned, no clothes suit Miss Kilman. 'The guilt is therefore double, argues Flynn. 'These clothes should suit her, and if they do not it is her own fault because she has failed to make herself fit into them.'⁵⁴

Miss Kilman's inability to dress appropriately directly contributes to her social isolation and loneliness. 'People don't ask me to parties. ... I'm plain. I'm unhappy' (MD 211) she complains, then losing her way at the department store, hopeless without her upper-class pupil's guidance.

She got up, blundered off among the little tables, rocking slightly from side to side, and somebody came after her with her petticoat and she lost her way, and was hemmed in by trunks specially prepared for taking to India; next got among the accouchement sets and baby linen; through all the commodities of the world, perishable and permanent, hams, drugs, flowers, stationery, variously smelling, now sweet, now sour, she lurched; saw herself thus lurching with her hat askew.

⁵⁴ Flynn, 170.

Very red in the face, full length in a looking-glass; and at last came out into the street. (MD 212)

In this chaotic scene, she is overwhelmed by all the traditional emblems of femininity, domesticity and beauty, which are foreign to her and all prove her undoing; her utter failure.

As Flynn points out, the fashion system entangles women in precisely this double bind, embodying the mythic promise of freedom, equality, self-reliance, and self-construction critiqued by Brown. Also, fashionable clothes hold the promise that they might someday be attainable by all.

Fashion, in this light, embodies a promise that makes all liberal subjects vulnerable to feeling either guilty for dressing fashionably or failed for not dressing fashionable ... The *ressentiment* psychically charges the vast fabric of social hierarchization, which is stitched into clothes themselves. In this way, it invests both these hierarchies and the fashion system with tremendous affective capital; it infuses the capitalist machine with psychic life. At the same time, it binds women together around a single axis of desire for fashionable clothing. Paradoxically, however, resentment also divides women, rendering them competitive and thus compelling them to buy the latest clothes so as to catch up with what is deemed desirable. Through this double-manoeuvre of division and bondage, resentment fuels and maintains the fashion system.⁵⁵

Ellie Henderson, Clarissa's cousin, also exemplifies the lack of fitting in. Her 'panic fear' arises from her 'three hundred pounds income, and her weaponless state (she could not earn a penny)' which makes her 'timid, and more and more disqualified year by

⁵⁵ Flynn, 170-71.

year to meet well-dressed people who did this sort of thing every night of the season, merely telling their maids ‘I’ll wear so and so’. Ellie, on the other hand, runs out ‘nervously’ and buys ‘cheap pink flowers, half a dozen, and then [throws] a shawl over her old black dress’ (MD 234). Mabel Waring, protagonist of Woolf’s already discussed ‘The New Dress,’ certainly fits the profile as well. In addition, desperately striving to keep up appearances, Clarissa’s guests are portrayed as quite ridiculous. Lady Bradshaw wears ‘grey and silver, balancing like a sea-lion at the edge of its tank, barking for invitations’ (MD 242) and another distinguished lady is ‘absurdly overdressed,’ resembling ‘a cockatoo’ (MD 166).

By demonstrating the two women’s painful interior reactions to one another, fuelled by for example guilt, envy and resentment, Woolf underlines that underneath the clothes, which serve as markers of class identity, they are vulnerable women who wish to be loved and appreciated. In fact, it can be argued that the root of these two women’s conflict – and the very thing that makes it so intense – is that they care about one another. The fact that Miss Kilman wants to unmask Clarissa indicates that she believes that underneath all those trappings of class, they are merely performing a role that has been assigned to them by society. In the words of Flynn, by drawing attention to the ways in which clothing intimately shapes women’s social and psychic identities, Woolf opened the dialogue to a class dilemma, not offering solutions but beginning to ‘lift the veils that obscure intricately interwoven social, economic, and psychological factors which support what she views as an oppressive patriarchal, capitalist system.’⁵⁶

⁵⁶ Flynn, 172.

If the Glove Fits: ‘Mrs Dalloway in Bond Street’

Having analyzed *Mrs Dalloway* and its class-related conflict, let us take a brief look at Clarissa as she first sprung to life in a short story entitled ‘Mrs Dalloway in Bond Street’, published in literary magazine called *The Dial* in 1923. As opposed to the novel’s more sympathetic, multi-faceted heroine, here Clarissa is a one-dimensional stereotype, representative of the idle upper class. Just like in the novel, Clarissa is planning a party, her first destination being Bond Street. Instead of the novel’s opening statement: ‘Mrs Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself’ (MD 129), here, Clarissa’s mission is of another nature: ‘Mrs Dalloway said she would buy the gloves herself’ (CSF 206).⁵⁷ This detail immediately highlights the discrepancy between the two Clarissas. In the words of Koppen, the substitution of gloves from flowers brings to view the socio-economic implications of the sartorial commodity. With this change in the object of transaction, ‘a change is brought about in the nature of the transaction itself, foregrounding its relations of class, of server and served.’⁵⁸

Clarissa’s mission is to purchase a pair of white, French pearl-buttoned gloves for wearing at her party that evening. Woolf’s choice of motif is not coincidental as gloves are an essential accoutrement of an upper-class lady. According to Stallybrass and Jones, the gloves of aristocrats and gentry traditionally display hands to which labour is alien. Therefore, their function is ‘to occupy the hands in the manu-facture of the immaterial.’ Interestingly, gloves thus ‘materialise a paradox: they draw attention to the hand while making the hands useless, or useful only for putting on and taking off a glove, or for

⁵⁷ Virginia Woolf, ‘Mrs Dalloway in Bond Street,’ (1927) in *The Complete Shorter Fiction*, ed. Susan Dick (London: Triad Grafton, 1987), 206-216. All further references in the text (in parentheses) are to this edition, abbreviated CSF.

⁵⁸ Koppen, 31.

holding gloves or handkerchiefs or fans or flowers.’⁵⁹ Moreover, white gloves represent literal as well as a symbolic detachment from reality – a means of not having to touch on a difficult situation, with one’s bare hands, for example, the plight of the lower classes. The kind Clarissa wants is not made for using at work but at elegant parties of the idle rich.

In *Mrs Dalloway*, gloves again represent detachment, tradition and class. Clarissa’s difficulty connecting with her daughter, is crystallized in terms of gloves as the former shops in Bond Street,

pausing for a moment at the window of a glove shop where, before the War, you could buy almost perfect gloves. And her old Uncle William used to say a lady is known by her shoes and her gloves ... ‘Gloves and shoes; she had a passion for gloves; but her own daughter, her Elizabeth, cared not a straw for either of them.

(MD 133-4)

Interestingly, gloves also feature in Clarissa’s power struggle with Miss Kilman over her daughter.

Elizabeth said she had forgotten her gloves. That was because Miss Kilman and her mother hated each other. She could not bear to see them together. She ran upstairs to find her gloves. (MD 207)

Clarissa resents her nemesis for having a better relationship with her daughter. During their silent confrontation in Clarissa’s doorway, gloves represent Elizabeth’s means of escaping becoming a pawn in their power play. She does not want to touch on the situation, to get caught in the middle.

⁵⁹ Peter Stallybrass and Ann Rosalind Jones, ‘Fetishizing the Glove in Renaissance Europe,’ *Critical Inquiry* 28:1 (2001), 118.

Over London's haven of luxury goods looms the shadow of the Great War, which has recently ended, leaving the nation with sorrow and devastation transcending class lines. On her way to Bond Street, Clarissa of the short story also fondly remembers the wise words of her old Uncle William: 'A lady is known by her gloves and her shoes' (CSF 213). Such received wisdom of bodily practice, Koppen writes, is given prominence in the story as people bolster faith in the reality and continuity of their existence at times of transition and crisis, practicing class through everyday ritual.

Fastening one's hem, buttoning one's gloves, keeping one's head high and body upright – this is the embodiment the corporeal practice of faith, we are shown; faith in the values of one's class and past generations, the dignity of sacrifice, loyalty to the flag.⁶⁰

Indeed, there is a sense of comfort in Clarissa's long line of ancestors who has shopped at Bond Street, even though commodities are scarcer than before; it is time to be frugal.

A hundred years ago her great-grandfather, Seymour Parry ... had walked down Bond Street. Down Bond Street the Parrys had walked for a hundred years, and might have met the Dalloways (Leighs on the mother's side) going up, her father got his clothes from Hill's. There was a roll of cloth in the window, and here just one jar on a black table, incredibly expensive; like the thick pink salmon on the ice block at the fishmonger's. The jewels were exquisite – pink and orange stars, paste, Spanish, she thought, the chains of old gold; starry buckles, little brooches which had been worn on sea-green satin by ladies with high head-dresses. But no good looking! One must economize. (CSF 211)

⁶⁰ Koppen, 31.

Revealing Clarissa as a snob is her thought process while taking a seat at the shop counter, scrutinizing a poorly dressed woman. ‘It would be intolerable if dowdy women came to her party! Would one have liked Keats if he had worn red socks?’ (CSF 213). Also, Clarissa refers to the shop assistant as ‘girl’ even though they are the same age. Curiously, she does demonstrate an interest in the latter’s well-being, trying to cross the counter, as it were. She even feels slight guilt about having her fetch her gloves; ‘to bother her – perhaps the one day in the month ... when it’s an agony to stand’ (CSF 213-14); asks if she doesn’t get ‘fearfully tired’ (CSF 214) and even comes close to offering her luxurious holiday accommodation at her friend’s lodging. But Clarissa stops herself just in time, having already been reprimanded by her husband for ‘the folly of giving impulsively. ... And she could feel the girl wouldn’t like to be given things. There she was in her place. ... Selling gloves was her job’ (CSF 214).

Clarissa also experiences a flash of empathy – even guilt – thinking of the thousands of ‘young men who had died so that life could go on’ (CSF 215). However, having secured her perfectly fitting pair, she shifts the focus back to herself.

At last! Half an inch above the elbow; pearl buttons; five and a quarter. My dear slow coach, thought Clarissa, do you think I can sit here the whole morning?

Now you’ll take twenty-five minutes to bring me my change! (CSF 215).

Saying that, Clarissa notices ‘little brown spots on her arm’ (CSF 215) caused by the powder and water required for fitting into the tight gloves. Just like a leopard can’t change its spots, neither can Clarissa change her class.

Mark Gaipa also addresses the short story’s opening statement, wondering who else could have bought the gloves in Clarissa’s place. Gloves are after all, a highly personal

item as the proverb *to fit like a glove* bears testimony to. On the other hands, purchasing flowers is a task that any servant could have performed. Gaipa points out that Edwardian department stores, for example the Army & Navy Stores, had begun selling women's gloves by mail order catalogue as early as 1907, which indicates that customers did not have to try them on first. However, the gloves that Clarissa and her fellow shoppers want to buy appear to be too form-fitting to be given as a gift or bought through the mail. Before the Great War, a tight fit was of the utmost importance. In fact, at the end of the nineteenth century, gloves were even made on prepared models of the customers' hands.⁶¹

The ladies indeed struggle with finding a pair that fits, causing them both sadness and frustration. Not even the gloves they wear fit properly. The grieving Lady Bexborough, who passes Clarissa in her carriage, wears a white glove, 'loose at her wrist' (CSF 211-12). At the shop, Clarissa announces her mission with an exasperated crescendo: 'Gloves', she says, 'White gloves'. 'Above the elbow.' Then she reaches the peak uttering 'These really don't fit' (CSF 212). Her fellow customer also faces the same problem.

The lady shook her head sadly. Again the gloves were too large. She turned round the glass. 'Above the wrist,' she reproached the grey-haired woman; who looked and agreed. They waited; a clock ticked; Bond Street hummed, dulled, distant; the woman went away holding gloves. 'Above the wrist,' said the lady, mournfully, raising her voice. (CSF 212-13)

Eventually, the lady gives up, rises 'very sadly', takes her bag and looks at the gloves on the counter. 'But they were all too large – always too large at the wrist' (CSF

⁶¹ Gaipa, 25.

213). The third customer, later identified as Miss Anstruther, even tears a glove, stubbornly attempting, much like Cinderella's stepsisters, to force it onto her hand. The next pair she tries on is yet 'a shade too tight' (CSF 213). 'Madame's hands are so slender,' the shop assistant tells Clarissa, 'drawing the glove firmly, smoothly, down over her rings. And Clarissa looked at her arm in the looking-glass, the glove hardly came to the elbow. Were there other a half an inch longer?' (CSF 213). The shop assistant becomes even more apologetic as the ladies damage the merchandise. 'A fault of the skin,' she offers, blaming the tanning process. 'Gloves have never been quite so reliable since the war' (CSF 215).

As this demonstrates, nobody could have bought the gloves in Clarissa's place. The only way, Gaipa argues, the statement would make sense is if a body double existed, someone possessing her exact proportions and taste, which is obviously impossible. His conclusion is that Woolf already had Septimus Warren Smith in mind; that he was already present as Clarissa's spiritual twin. In other words, a *double* theme was already at work, though in the form of Clarissa's *bodily* counterpart. And that suggests, in turn, that the doubling that appears in *Mrs Dalloway* is closely related, in its origins, to clothing – the idea of one's standing, quite literally, in someone else's shoes.⁶² Here, Woolf addresses the advent of ready-made clothing and the democratization of fashion, heralded by the War. Instead of everything being made to fit, the upper-class ladies find themselves increasingly having to fit into garments in standardized sizes. In other words, they must adjust to a new world order in which fine clothing is no longer the visible marker of class it used to be.

⁶² Gaipa, 25.

As I hope to have demonstrated, in her short story 'Mrs Dalloway in Bond Street,' Woolf wanted to criticize the great class barrier that persevered, despite a devastating War, which permanently and indiscriminately scarred all sections of British society. Even if Clarissa feigns interest in the shop-girl's well-being, at the end of the day she cannot and will not place herself in her shoes. And obviously, the central motif of white gloves is the ultimate symbol for the leisure class and their detachment from society's problems. Also, Woolf again addresses the frustration of upper class ladies as they face the problem of fitting into ready-made clothing instead of having all their clothing custom-made.

To the Lighthouse

I'm now all on the strain with desire to stop journalism & get on to *To the Lighthouse*. This is going to be fairly short: to have father's character done complete in it; & mother's; & St Ives; & childhood; & all the usual things I try to put in, life, death &c.

(May 1925; D III, 18)

Based on her own family and her carefree childhood summers spent at St. Ives in Cornwall, Virginia Woolf's acclaimed novel *To the Lighthouse* (1927) is her most autobiographical piece of fiction. The novel can be described as her attempt to come to terms with her mother Julia Stephen's untimely passing and the subsequent dissolution of the family unit. *To the Lighthouse* is an account of the Ramsay family and their eight children who spend their summer holidays on the Isle of Skye in Scotland, surrounded by friends from all walks of life. Taking place before and after the Great War, in the years between 1909 and 1919, the novel is divided into three sections. 'The Window' takes place over the course of a summer's day in 1909; 'Time Passes' describes the abandoned, deteriorating residence during a ten-year period beginning with Mrs Ramsay's death; in 'The Lighthouse' Mr Ramsay returns with some of his children and the artist Lily Briscoe, all, in their own way, seeking closure.

In *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf's application of clothing as literary motif has more subjective, emotional connotations than in her previous works. With garments such as knitted stockings that might never be worn, empty gloves with twisted fingers, vanished heirloom brooches and moth-eaten clothes left behind in wardrobes, her intention is to

convey bereavement, dissolution and grief, absence rather than presence. In addition, Mrs Ramsay's green Cashmere shawl represents domesticity and motherly protection, as well as mankind's futile struggle against the passing of time and inescapable death. In addition, by means of clothing, Woolf addresses not just issues of class, but also interpretations of memory and emotion and the many ways in which the Great War affected people's lives and relationships.

Knitting, Matchmaking and Misguided Charity

Certainly there she was, in the very centre of that great Cathedral space which was childhood; there she was from the very first. (MOB 81)

In the same way that Julia Stephen was the leading figure in Woolf's childhood as the above passage shows, Mrs Ramsay is at the centre of her domain. Taking care of others is what gives her life meaning; it is what defines her. David Bradshaw aptly comments that all the qualities Woolf most admired in her mother are embodied in Mrs Ramsay: 'her beauty, her lovingness, her tender solicitude for those in her care, her concern for the poor and the disadvantaged in her community,' but at the same time she explores Julia's limitations, 'especially her conventionality, her anti-feminism, her dubious concept of charity, her imperiousness, and her imperialism.'⁶³

For Mrs Ramsay, her husband and eight children are indeed not enough; she feels compelled to concern herself with the welfare of everyone she comes across, including the Lighthouse keeper's family and her many protégés such as Minta Doyle and Lily Briscoe. Meddling thus with everyone's lives, she often oversteps boundaries. Minta's

⁶³ David Bradshaw, 'Introduction' to Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, ed. David Bradshaw (1927; Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008), xvii.

mother for example accuses her of robbing her of Minta's affections. After all, 'No one could accuse her of taking pains to impress. She was often ashamed of her own shabbiness' (TTL 49).⁶⁴ Throughout the novel's first section, 'The Window,' Mrs Ramsay is shown 'knitting, impatiently' (TTL 8) a pair of stockings. Incidentally, it is not intended for any of her children but for the Lighthouse keeper's son and she is desperate to finish it before their trip the next day. Knitting the pair is not even sufficient; she instinctively plays matchmaker at the same time.

[S]he must see if the stocking did not need to be an inch or two longer in the leg. Smiling for an admirable idea had flashed upon her this very second – William and Lily should marry – she took the heather-mixture stocking, with its criss-cross of steel needles at the mouth of it, and measured it against James's leg. 'My dear, stand still,' she said, for in his jealousy, not liking to serve as measuring-block for the Lighthouse keepers little boy, James fidgeted purposely; and if he did that, how could she see, was it too long, was it too short? She asked. (TTL 24-25)

The seven-year-old James is much attached to his mother and therefore jealous that she is blatantly forcing him to help her expand her warmth and affection to other boys.

According to Bradshaw, Woolf here criticizes her mother's interest in charitable work as futile and self-satisfying, exposing her 'kind of individualistic, Victorian-style philanthropy' and a 'vast and benevolent lethargy of well-wishing' in which the whole leisured class has sunk.⁶⁵ Further underlining this argument is the fact that in addition to the woollen stockings, Mrs Ramsay considers sending to the Lighthouse 'a pile of old

⁶⁴ Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, ed. David Bradshaw (1927; Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008). All further references in the text (in parentheses) are to this edition, abbreviated TTL.

⁶⁵ Bradshaw, xviii.

magazines, and some tobacco, indeed whatever she could find lying about, not really wanted, but only littering the room' (TTL 8).

Actually, Mrs Ramsay appears conflicted and fully aware of her overbearing nature, secretly wondering whether

all this desire of hers to give, to help, was vanity. For her own self-satisfaction was it that she wished so instinctively to help, to give, that people might say of her, 'O Mrs Ramsay! Dear Mrs Ramsay... Mrs Ramsay, of course' and need her and send for her and admire her? (TTL 36-7).

But soon after she changes her mind, deciding that she does not mind being called 'tyrannical, domineering, masterful' (TTL 50).

Realizing that the stocking still isn't finished, Mrs Ramsay is curiously distraught. "It's too short," she said, "ever so much too short.' Never did anybody look so sad' (TTL 26). She then resumes knitting, thereby giving and helping, in a brief scene that depicts her as a Madonna in her cathedral; the epitome of beauty and serenity:

Knitting her reddish-brown hairy stocking, with her head outlined absurdly by the gilt frame, the green shawl which she had tossed over the edge of the frame, and the authenticated masterpiece by Michael Angelo, Mrs Ramsay smoothed out what had been harsh in her manner a moment before. (TTL 27-28)

A very insecure man, her husband the philosopher and writer Mr Ramsay demands sympathy for his presumed professional failure. But unlike her tender loving care to everyone else, his wife won't humour him. Silently, she sits, 'flashing her needles, confident, upright,' 'she laughed, she knitted'; 'flashing her needles' (TTL 33, 34).

Even though Mrs Ramsay is devoted to her family she also needs to ‘be herself, by herself’ (TTL 52).

All the being and the doing, expansive, glittering, vocal, evaporated; and one shrunk, with a sense of solemnity, to being oneself, a wedge-shaped core of darkness, something invisible to others. Although she continued to knit, and sat upright, it was thus that she felt herself. (TTL 52)

Beneath the confident surface, she feels invisible, nothing but a wedge-shaped core of darkness. ‘Not as oneself did one find rest ever, in her experience (she accomplished here something dexterous with her needles), but as a wedge of darkness’ (TTL 53). As her mind drifts between reality and fantasy, her needles provide her with a cover; a link to reality, whisking her back when she gets too carried away. Pointy and sharp, they are her weapon, her means of being grounded and purposeful, or at least appearing that way.

She knitted with firm composure, slightly pursing her lips and without being aware of it, so stiffened and composed the lines of her face in a habit of sternness ... She stopped knitting, she held the reddish brown stockings dangling in her hands a moment. She saw the light again. (TTL 54)

Mirroring its opening, the section concludes with Mrs Ramsay still holding the pair of stockings in her hands. Evening has come and she is looking out of the window, perhaps realizing that death is looming on the horizon. Calm and gracious, she is not aggravated by her husband’s snide observation that she won’t be able to finish the pair in time. “No,” she said, flattening the stocking out upon her knee, “I shan’t finish it” (TTL 99). Even if the stockings on which she has spent such effort knitting might not make it to the Lighthouse, she has done her best.

Fictionalizing Perception

Interestingly, Woolf's very first memory is related to clothing. In her autobiographical essay, 'A Sketch of the Past,' she remembers her beloved mother in terms of her beaded floral dress.

I begin: the first memory. This was of red and purple flowers on a black ground – my mother's dress; and she was sitting either in a train or in an omnibus, and I was on her lap. I therefore saw the flowers she was wearing very close; and can still see purple and red and blue, I think, against the black; they must have been anemones, I suppose. ... My first memory is of her lap; the scratch of some beads on her dress comes back to me as I pressed my cheek against it. Then I see her in her white dressing gown on the balcony; and the passion flower with the purple star on its petals.⁶⁶ ... She had three rings; a diamond ring, an emerald ring, and an opal ring. My eyes used to fix themselves upon the lights in the opal as it moved across the page of the lesson book when she taught us, and I was glad that she left it to me ... Also I hear the tinkle of her bracelets, made of twisted silver ... as she went about the house; especially as she came up at night to see if we were asleep. (MOB 64, 81-82)

Here, it is evident that Woolf recognized the capacity of clothing and jewellery to generate memories and applied it in her fiction. Her most precious childhood memories

⁶⁶ This description is echoed in the mind of Charles Tansley, who is infatuated with Mrs Ramsay: 'With stars in her eyes and veils in her hair, with cyclamen and wild violets – what nonsense was he thinking? She was fifty at least; she had eight children. Stepping through fields of flowers and taking to her breast buds that had broken and lambs that had fallen; with the stars in her eyes and the wind in her hair – He took her bag. ... Charles Tansley felt an extraordinary pride; felt the wind and the cyclamen and the violets for he was walking with a beautiful woman for the first time in his life. He had hold of her bag.' (TTL 15)

are based on sensorial perception; she recognized the way in which a child's mind perceives the world in a different way than adults, absorbing their surroundings like a sponge, with all senses fully alert. Later, these memories will consist of fragmented flashes of colours, sights, sounds, scents or tastes. In the same way, perceiving those elements can also trigger these memories, transporting the person back to her childhood, stepping into the memories. Woolf's fondest memories therefore consist not simply of visual elements such as colours and patterns. Notably, she *feels* the scratch of her mother's beads against her chin; she *hears* the tinkle of her bracelets. She can even *smell* the flowers on her mother's dress, as Abbs points out, also calling attention to the excerpt's cinematic quality as a means to exhibit visual closeness.

The filmic type of close-up of the flowers on the dress sets up a myopic focus so that there is a nearness that is both emotional and physical. The colours on the dress produce a certain painterly effect and rhythm of the body – 'red and purple.' Next, the blackness of the background of the flowers on the dress provides a void so that there is the feeling of being alone with the flowers, that is, immersed in the rhythm and separate from the rest of the world. The mother is her world. These flowers then procure a virtual life in the present when in retrospect the child subject proposes that these flowers must have been anemones. They become real flowers so that the olfactory comes into play; we smell the perfume of the flowers because we are as if so near. In consequence, the perfume of the flowers is then super-imposed upon the mother and becomes

as if the mother's perfume. And as part of the dress, the perfume and flowers cause the dress (to which she is close) to be the mother.⁶⁷

As this passage shows, in Woolf's mind, there is a confluence between her mother and her dress; they merge into a single entity.

By the same token, when describing her grief following Julia's death, Woolf recalls dressing for dinner and adorning her mother with jewellery.

There were none of those snatched moments that were so amusing and for some reason so soothing and yet exciting when one ran downstairs to dinner arm in arm with mother; or chose the jewels she was to wear. (MOB 94-95)

To the Lighthouse contains a tribute to this cherished shared ritual. In a lengthy passage Mrs Ramsay sits like a beautiful 'queen' (TTL 68) surrounded by her children, her loyal subjects, ceremoniously adorning her with emblems of beauty and power.

Jasper offered her an opal necklace; Rose a gold necklace. Which looked best against her black dress? Which did indeed? said Mrs Ramsay absent-mindedly, looking at her neck and shoulders (but avoiding her face), in the glass ... But which was it to be? They had all the trays of her jewel-case open. The gold necklace, which was Italian, or the opal necklace, which Uncle James had brought her from India; or should she wear her amethysts? 'Choose, dearest, choose,' she said, hoping that they would make haste. But she let them take their time to choose: she let Rose, particularly, take up this and then that, and hold her jewels against the black dress, for this little ceremony of choosing jewels, which was gone through every night, was what Rose liked best, she knew. She had some hidden reason of her own for attaching great importance to this choosing

⁶⁷ Abbs, 211.

what her mother was to wear. What was the reason, Mrs Ramsay wondered, standing still to let her clasp the necklace she had chosen, divining, through her own past, some deep, some buried, some quite speechless feeling that one had for one's mother at Rose's age. (TTL 66, 67)

Mrs Ramsay does not appear to particularly enjoy the ceremony, hoping that they hurry, all the while absent-mindedly looking out of the window at a pair of birds in a tree. The fact that she is unable to look at herself in the mirror indicates discomfort, sadness and guilt. She hardly recognizes herself; she is getting older, 'shabby and worn out and not presumably (her cheeks were hollow, her hair was white) any longer a sight that filled the eyes with joy' (TTL 37). Even though it is not stated, she is most likely already ill and aware that she will soon die and leave her children motherless. Rose evidently represents the author who thereby attempts to see the world (and herself) from her mother's point of view. This view is supported by the fact that in Mrs Ramsay's opinion, her daughter's mouth is too big, 'but she had a wonderful gift with her hands. If they had charades, Rose made the dresses' (TTL 49).

As discussed in a previous chapter, dressing for dinner was the convention of every self-respecting English upper class family, even when on holiday. The housekeeper Mrs McNab remembers how the Ramsays used to have 'gentlemen staying there, ladies in evening dress, she had seen them once through the dining room door, all sitting at dinner. ... in all their jewellery' (TTL 115). The importance of dressing up is underlined by James who likes to play with the Army & Navy Stores Catalogue. Not only does he cut out pictures of a refrigerator and a mowing machine – items exclusive to the idle upper class

– he also chooses ‘a gentleman in evening dress’ (TTL 52) which he has first coloured yellow with a piece of chalk.

Probably drawing from her own experience, Woolf skilfully describes the moment when the gong solemnly sounds, demanding that everyone, whether

in attics, in bedrooms, on little perches of their own, reading, writing, putting the last smooth to their hair or fastening dresses, must leave all that and the little odds and ends on their washing-tables and dressing-tables, and the novels on the bed-tables, and the diaries which were so private, and assemble in the dining-room for dinner. (TTL 68)

Among those ‘reading, writing’ when the gong sounds is a guest of the Ramsays named Charles Tansley, a young scholar with a chip on his shoulder because of his underprivileged background. He highly dislikes this custom; to him it ‘all seems ‘silly superficial flimsy. Why did they dress? He had come down in his ordinary clothes. He had not got any dress clothes. ... Women made civilization impossible with all their ‘charm,’ all their silliness’ (TTL 70). Exemplifying the traditional equation previously discussed, in Charles’s opinion the superficiality of dressing up belongs to the feminine sphere. He, on the other hand, belongs to the masculine sphere of intelligence – of reading and writing.

In Charles’s case, there is also another issue at play, that of clothing and the class barriers it constitutes. During dinner, he is extremely uncomfortable among the posh guests ‘in his old flannel trousers. He had no others. He felt very rough and isolated and lonely’ (TTL 71). As the evening wears on, he feels ‘rigid and barren like a pair of boots

that has been soaked and gone dry so that you can hardly force your feet into them. Yet he must force his feet into them' (TTL 73-4).

To the Lighthouse contains another instance of jewellery as a motif: an heirloom pearl brooch. Among the Ramsays' many guests are Minta Doyle and Paul Rayley. Quite an incompatible pair, Paul is rather dull and insipid whereas Minta is fearless, feisty and independent, which is illustrated by way of her wearing 'more sensible clothes than most women. She wore very short skirts and black knickerbockers. She would jump straight into a stream and flounder across' (TTL 62). Mrs Ramsay calls her 'incongruous' and a 'tomboy' with a 'hole in her stocking' (TTL 48), which every guest of the family cannot help noticing. At a later date, Lily again remembers Minta in terms of her holed stocking. 'How that little round hole of pink heel seemed to flaunt itself before them!' she recalls. To the sixty-year-old William Bankes, Mr Ramsay's friend, that hole means no less than 'the annihilation of womanhood, and dirt and disorder' (TTL 142). Wearing a stocking with a hole in it suggests lack of interest in one's appearance, especially where a woman is concerned. Moreover, a hole represents a rupture, a destruction of unity and an absence.

Mrs Ramsay, ever the matchmaker, insists that Paul and Minta become engaged, paying no heed to their apparent incompatibility. Seemingly not too fond of the idea, they nonetheless head for a stroll on the beach. Suddenly, Minta cries out that

she had lost her grandmother's brooch – her grandmother's brooch, the sole ornament she possessed – a weeping willow, it was (they must remember it) set in pearls. They must have seen it, she said, with the tears running down her cheeks, the brooch which her grandmother had fastened her cap with till the last

day of her life. Now she had lost it. She would rather have lost anything than that! She would go back and look for it. ... It was her grandmother's brooch; she would rather have lost anything but that, and yet Nancy [Ramsay] felt, though it might be true that she minded losing her brooch, she wasn't crying only for that. She was crying for something else. We might all sit down and cry, she felt. But she did not know what for. (TTL 63-64)

Minta is indeed crying for more than her brooch. She is crying for her impending loss of her freedom and independence, facing marital life with a man she does not love. The engaged couple arrives 'awfully late' for dinner and not happy at all. "I lost my brooch – my grandmother's brooch," said Minta with a sound of lamentation in her voice, and a suffusion in her large brown eyes, looking down, looking up' to which Mr Ramsay rhetorically asks how 'could she be such as goose ... as to scramble about the rocks in jewels?' (TTL 80). He does not understand that Minta never parted with her brooch; it was an essential part of her and clearly had sentimental significance as it belonged to her grandmother. As already discussed, jewellery can play a significant role in conjuring fond childhood memories. It is stated that it is the only piece of jewellery she wears, that she is not interested in such things. Therefore, it was more of a safety pin, as it were; a talisman. Swept away by the waves, it will forever overshadow the moment of the couple's engagement with grief and loss.

In the novel's final section, 'The Lighthouse,' it turns out that Minta and Paul's marriage was not successful at all. In a scene ingeniously depicting the underlying tension, she returns from a night out, 'wreathed, tinted garish' finding him waiting for her 'in his pyjamas ... in the cadaverous early morning light' (TTL 142). This scene must

have been inspired by Matisse's painting *The Conversation*, discussed in this essay's introduction. Completing the scene, the carpet they are standing on has a hole in it, just like Minta's stocking had on the day of their engagement. This cleverly indicates that their marital home is as dissolute as Minta herself, the quintessential independent modern woman of the 1920s.

Clothes Take the Human Form

The novel's second section, tellingly entitled 'Time Passes,' poetically deals with the force of time and the elements overruling everything. It metaphorically describes the ten-year period of steady decay of the family's summer residence, which has been abandoned following Mrs Ramsay's demise. The house has few defences against the relentless assault of time and the elements, with things 'rotting in the drawers' and the place 'gone to rack and ruin' (TTL 113). Then, as Rosenthal puts it, a countervailing force, slow-moving but irresistible gradually lumbers into action. In two aged cleaning ladies, Mrs McNab and Mrs Bast, Woolf embodies that primitive human capacity to endure.⁶⁸ Left in their places, Mrs McNab comes across things the family has shed and left behind,

a pair of shoes, a shooting cap, some faded skirts and coats in wardrobes – those alone kept the human shape and in the emptiness indicated how once they were filled and animated; how once hands were busy with hooks and buttons; how once the looking-glass had held a face. (TTL 106)

Immediately her thoughts go to the people who used to wear and use those items. Simply put, they represent the absence of those who used to wear them.

⁶⁸ Rosenthal, 121.

For there were clothes in the cupboards; they had left clothes in all the bedrooms. What was she to do with them? They had the moth in them – Mrs Ramsay’s things. Poor lady! She would never want *them* again. She was dead, they said, years ago, in London. There was the old grey cloak she wore gardening (Mrs McNab fingered it). (TTL 111)

Notably, merely *looking* at Mrs Ramsay’s grey cloak⁶⁹ is not sufficient; Mrs McNab *fingers* it, yet another instance of evocation of memories via sensorial perception.

She could see her with one of the children by her in that grey cloak, there were boots and shoes; and a brush and comb left on the dressing table, for all the world, as if she expected to come back tomorrow. ... Why the dressing table drawers were full of things (she pulled them open), handkerchiefs, bits of ribbon, yes she could see Mrs Ramsay as she came up the drive with the washing. (TTL 111)

Fingering the garments, Mrs McNab envisages Mrs Ramsay going about her daily life. According to Koppen, the clothes left behind in the house figure in a symbolism that hesitates between the human and the non-human. ‘Of course something similar applies to the house itself; the human *étui* overtaken by nature’s plots, but the clothes left behind are even more poignant, invested with a stronger mnemonic force than other human possessions.’⁷⁰

Woolf’s choice of a cloak as representative of Mrs Ramsay is no coincidence. Such a garment covers and protects but is at the same time expository. Most of the novel’s

⁶⁹ Mrs Ramsay is often depicted wearing the dreary colour grey. Mrs Banks’s first recollection of her is wearing a grey hat, looking ‘astonishingly beautiful’ (TTL 145). Later she is referred to as a ‘woman in grey’ (TTL 146). Mr and Mrs Ramsay both are spotted wearing ‘grey-coloured clothes’ (TTL 155). Also, the plain Lily Briscoe always wears a grey dress.

⁷⁰ Koppen, 155.

characters are indeed portrayed by way of their coats. The impoverished, embittered Mr Tansley often goes ‘without a greatcoat in winter’ (TTL 13); the unpleasant neighbour Mr Carmichael is ‘unkempt; he dropped things on his coat’ (TTL 36); Mr Bankes on the contrary ‘smells of soap,’ appealing to Lily Briscoe because of ‘his cleanliness and impersonality and the white scientific coat which seemed to clothe him’ (TTL 41); Mr Ramsay buttons his coat during his pilgrimage to the Lighthouse; before sending Minta on a stroll with Paul, Mrs Ramsay lovingly draws her ‘wrap’ (TTL 94) tightly around her, as if making her assume the mantle of married life and domesticity. Finally, during the summerhouse’s abandoned state, a tramp sleeps there ‘with his coat round him to ward off the cold’ (TTL 113).

Incidentally, Woolf also addresses the matter of clothing and the human spirit that occupies them earlier in the novel as Lily Briscoe addresses her conflicted feelings towards Mrs Ramsay. Lily’s passion is painting; she has chosen that lifestyle over marriage and children, as if the two paths were mutually exclusive. Even though she is content with her choice, she still feels inadequate – that her dedication to the arts is ‘so little, so virginal’ (TTL 43) against Mrs Ramsay’s tremendous success as a mother, wife and hostess.

How did she differ? What was the spirit in her, the essential thing, by which, had you found a glove in the corner of a sofa, you would have known it, from its twisted finger, hers indisputably? (TTL 42).

Here, Woolf’s belief in the inextricable link between people and their clothes is evident. To her, clothing is an extension of its owner, containing his or her spirit even when not worn. Koppen deems the sartorial image contained in Lily’s thoughts, particularly

striking for its suggestion of the power of the imprint even in its separation from an animating presence. Retaining not only the contours of the hand itself, but of its work, the glove for Lily is neither an inorganic ‘other’ nor a container of absence, but a manifestation of truth – like an allegorical sign if only one knew how to read its language, Koppen explains also pointing to the steel engravings appearing on Mrs Ramsay’s brow as she sits reading.

[B]oth are engravings of character, though differently so. Where the lineaments of what one may take as melancholy are inseparable from physiognomy, the glove, like marks of writing, continues to signify apart from the body. As such it becomes a figure of the power of the *tupoi* – the imprint – over death.⁷¹

After having pondered on Mrs Ramsay’s character while looking at the glove with the twisted finger, Lily wants to confront Mrs Ramsay and defend her career path as just as valuable as that of a housewife; she wants to make it clear that ‘she liked to be alone; she liked to be herself.’ However, she cannot bring herself to refute Mrs Ramsay’s ‘simple certainty’ (TTL 43) knowing that she will only be regarded as a fool; she will make her feel like a little girl as always.

According to Jane Lilienfeld, Lily clearly sees both Mrs. Ramsay's domineering wish to manage all lives around her, and her incomparable breathtaking ability to make all love her beyond the bounds of mortal flesh.

The shape that Mrs. Ramsay wears when Lily thinks of her ... interweaves Mrs. Ramsay’s characteristics as a maturely beautiful, intuitively gifted mother and housewife with qualities beyond those of a mere earthly being. Lily’s longing for Mrs. Ramsay’s meaning, more than human nature itself, is the only way she can

⁷¹ Koppen, 34.

partake of Mrs. Ramsay's essence until she can paint the picture, which embodies her. What she desires is that which James and Mr. Ramsay want: to have this woman, in all her beauty and its meaning, hers and hers alone. The language of this passage, its rhythm, the intensity of its longing merge to create the anguish with which Lily feels her separation from the force which is Mrs. Ramsay's nature. Lily's longings imply someone larger than life, a being whose essence is the motherly quality itself; an all-nourishing, life-giving archetype. Mrs. Ramsay takes on mythic qualities outside of Lily's thought, though Lily's perceptions are the primary mode of characterizing Mrs. Ramsay as archetypal.⁷²

Then, Lily remembers laying her head on Mrs Ramsay's lap and laughing almost hysterically at the thought of her hostess 'presiding with immutable calm over destinies which she completely failed to understand. She sat, simple, serious. She had recovered her sense of her now – this was the glove's twisted finger' (TTL 43). Lily has figured her out; exposed her as a clueless simpleton and refuted her power. On a final note, as Lilienfeld points out, the pronoun confusion shows clearly that the two women are momentarily indistinguishable. 'As soon as Lily thinks she has grasped "the glove's twisted finger" in her hand, Mrs. Ramsay eludes her.'⁷³

Veils, Shrouds and Shawls

The shrouded, cautious, dulled life took the place of all the chatter and laughter of the summer. (MOB 94)

⁷² Jane Lilienfeld, "The Deceptiveness of Beauty": Mother Love and Mother Hate in *To the Lighthouse*. *Twentieth Century Literature* 23:3 (1977), 349.

⁷³ Lilienfeld, 350.

'Time Passes' and 'The Lighthouse' contain an abundance of cloth-related imagery conveying death and loss, including 'tattered flags' (TTL 104); a 'swaying mantle of silence' (TTL 106); 'shrouded jugs and sheeted chairs' (TTL 106); a 'veil of silence' (TTL 106). Spring throws 'her cloak about her,' 'veil[s] her eyes' and 'avert[s] her head' (TTL 108) leading up to the summer, when Prue Ramsay dies 'of some illness connected with childbirth.'⁷⁴ A 'veil of crape' flaunts 'its prosperity in a world of woe' (TTL 126); Lily is 'shrouded in profound silence' (TTL 134). These examples reverberate the excerpt from Woolf's autobiographical sketch cited at the beginning of this section, explaining the atmosphere in the household after her mother's death. Koppen comments on this clear prominence of sartorial tropology both in Woolf's critique of a conventionalized rhetoric of mourning as well as in her figurations of the afterlife.

Veils, draperies and garments signify excess, concealment and conventionality in a Victorian culture of mourning (the shrouded, curtained rooms muffling and covering up any sense of reality at her mother's death; the 'passionate lamentations that ... hung about the genuine tragedy with folds of Eastern drapery' (MOB 40), but also index death as state and 'de-temporalised space' in a private allegory of life: the continued life of the dead as ghosts or spirits, the possibility of crossing and re-crossing thresholds of life and afterlife.⁷⁵

The most prominent motif however is Mrs Ramsay's green Cashmere shawl. While in the first half of the novel, it represents protection and domesticity, in the second part, it becomes the ideal canvas for illustrating the relentless passing of time, leading everyone

⁷⁴ Prue Ramsay's death echoes that of Woolf's half-sister Stella Duckworth, who died on July 19th 1897, possibly of a pregnancy complication, only three months after her wedding day. David Bradshaw, 'Explanatory Notes' in Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, ed. David Bradshaw (1927; Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008), 191-192.

⁷⁵ Koppen, 153-154.

closer to an inescapable death and decay. This is already hinted at in the novel's beginning as she comments that 'Things must spoil. ... What was the use of flinging a green Cashmere shawl over the edge of a picture frame? In two weeks it would be the colour of pea soup' (TTL 26).

In a pivotal scene, Mrs Ramsay uses her shawl to protect her frightened children from the portentous gaze of a boar's skull hanging on the nursery's wall.

'Well then,' said Mrs Ramsay, 'we will cover it up,' and they all watched her go to the chest of drawers, and open the little drawers quickly one after another, and not seeing anything that would do, she quickly took her own shawl off and wound it round the skull, round and round and round... (TTL 93)

No matter how many times Mrs Ramsay covers the skull, that *memento mori* casting its 'shadow' (TTL 93) over the room, she – or anyone for that matter – cannot escape death. With each repeated movement, she tries to protect and love her children better and better, perhaps sensing that she might soon be leaving them. Further solidifying the relationship between clothing and death is the summerhouse's attic, which is filled with 'bats, flannels, straw hats, ink-pots, paint-pots, beetles, and the skulls of small birds' (TTL 11).

In 'Time Passes,' the green shawl gradually loosens from the boar's skull. 'One fold of the shawl loosened and swung to and fro' (TTL 106); 'The rock was rent asunder; another fold of the shawl loosened; there it hung and swayed' (TTL 109); 'there came ... ominous sounds like the measured blows of hammers dulled on felt, which with their repeated shocks still further loosened the shawl' (TTL 109); 'Idly, aimlessly, the swaying shawl swung to and fro' (TTL 112). This is a sign that Mrs Ramsay's firm grasp of the people in her life is dwindling. The gradual revelation of the skull moreover underlines

that death will always triumph in the end, try as one might to suppress it. No longer confluent with its owner who incessantly produced, knitted, cooked, plotted and tended to everyone's needs, the shawl is now idle, aimlessly swinging to and fro. It has lost its purpose and so has the late Mrs Ramsay.

It has now been demonstrated how, in her autobiographical *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf turned to clothing as a device in her attempt to come to terms with the sorrow and bereavement that warped her adolescence because of her mother's death, applying her awareness of the impact of clothing on all the senses when it comes to creating and later recalling childhood memories. Incidentally, her method coincides with the term 'Objective Correlative', made famous by modernist writer and critic T. S. Eliot in his essay 'Hamlet and his Problems' (1919), collected in *The Sacred Wood* the following year.⁷⁶

The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an 'objective correlative'; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked.⁷⁷

Woolf indeed brilliantly identified and applied in her fiction the perfect symbols for expressing her childhood memories, evoking particular emotions for her readers. Clothes and jewels left behind or forever lost at sea convey an arresting absence rather than presence. Furthermore, unfinished stockings that will never be worn, as well as Minta's

⁷⁶ Nathalia Wright, 'A Source for T. S. Eliot's "Objective Correlative"?' *American Literature* 41:4 (1970), 589.

⁷⁷ T.S. Eliot, *The Sacred Wood*. (London: Methuen, 1920), Online July 1996. <www.bartleby.com/200>

repeatedly mentioned holed stockings represent a compelling lack and loss. The lingering spirit of Mrs Ramsay, and her continually decreasing grasp on her family and friends is represented via an empty glove, an abandoned cloak and a faded, green Cashmere shawl. On a final note, in this novel, Woolf continues to criticize the rigid class system and the ritualistic dressing for dinner. She again points out how clothing plays a fundamental part as an external marker of social and financial status, notably applying to both sexes, as made evident by the disgruntled Charles Tansley.

Orlando: A Biography

One of these days ... I shall sketch ... like a grand historical picture, the outlines of all my friends ... It might be a most amusing book. ... Vita should be Orlando, a young nobleman ... a biography beginning in the year 1500 & continuing to the present day, called Orlando: Vita; only with a change about from one sex to another. I think, for a treat, I shall let myself dash this in for a week...

(September, October 1927; D III, 156-157, 161)

Dashing English Ambassador and aristocrat Orlando awakens from a week-long slumber, robbed of his clothes and his Ribbon of the Garter. Looking in the mirror, he realizes that his body has been altered: He has become a woman. Unlike his biographer, Orlando is undeterred by his new condition and, wrapping himself in a Turkish cloak, he nonchalantly heads for the bathroom. This is the culmination of Virginia Woolf's *Orlando: A Biography* (1928); a fanciful, exuberant and epic account of the protagonist's eventful life spanning 400 years, from the Renaissance to 1928, i.e. the year of its being published. Woolf's inspiration for Orlando was her treasured friend Vita Sackville-West, an eccentric aristocrat and a prolific writer, famous for her flamboyant style. The novel features various aspects of Vita's extraordinary life: her writing career, her suitors and marriage, her cross-dressing, female lovers and the court battle she was forced to wage for her ancestral home, Knole in Kent, because of her gender.

Having begun as a joke and then turning out too long for her liking, Woolf worried that *Orlando* might 'fall between stools, be too long for a joke, & too frivolous for a serious book' (D III, 177). On the contrary, the novel proved a turning point in her career.

While her preceding novel *To the Lighthouse* sold 3,873 copies in the first year, *Orlando* sold 8,104 copies in the first six months, awarding her financial security and thereby enabling her to pursue her passion for writing, something she wished for on behalf of all women in the landmark book-length essay *A Room of One's Own*, also published in 1928. *Orlando's* key to success, according to Quentin Bell, was its universal appeal. 'Here was a work by a highbrow – a "difficult" novelist – which nevertheless was easy, amusing, and straightforward in its narrative.'⁷⁸

Even so, this extraordinary novel is more than a light-hearted tribute to her darling Vita; 'the longest and most charming love letter in history' as it was dubbed by Vita's son Nigel Nicolson.⁷⁹ *Orlando* is imbued with poignant criticism of gender-based inequality; the tale of a person who freely fluctuates between gender roles, sometimes easily manipulating the moral codes of a label-obsessed society – enjoying the best of both worlds – but at other times suffering because of its restrictions. Furthermore, it is generally considered Woolf's most powerful attack on imperialism and the pomposity of power-seeking men belonging to the so-called educated professions. To convey the message, clothing plays a fundamental role as the ultimate marker of gender, rank and power.

Clothing and Sexual Ambiguity

Orlando's introduction immediately plants the seed of sexual ambiguity, which will permeate the novel.

⁷⁸ Bell, Vol II, 140.

⁷⁹ Nigel Nicolson, *Portrait of a Marriage*. (New York: Atheneum Books, 1973), 202.

He – for there could be no doubt of his sex, though the fashion of the time did something to disguise it – was in the act of slicing at the head of a Moor, which swung from the rafters.⁸⁰

The very statement that there is no doubt regarding Orlando's sex of course has exactly the opposite effect. As Judy Little points out, the narrative's first word announces a masculine subject, yet the male subject is immediately and comically dismantled by the interruptive qualifications. 'The first sentence is what every sentence in the book is about and what every sentence comes to produce and unproduce in rhetorical play.'⁸¹ Simply put, imitating the novel's polymorphous mix of satire, fiction, biography and poetry, its protagonist is all but impossible to define.

Everything about Orlando is sexually ambiguous. As a young man during the Renaissance period, meeting the Queen he wears 'crimson breeches, lace collar, waistcoat of taffeta, and shoes with rosettes on them as big as double dahlias' (O 20). His physical features are similarly gender ambiguous. His hair is long and curled, his cheeks are covered in 'peach down' and his eyes are like 'drenched violets' (O 15).

At night, wrapped in a grey cloak, Orlando seeks the company of the lower classes. Women perch on his knee, fling their arms round his neck and 'guessing that something out of the common [lies] hid beneath his duffle cloak,' they are 'quite as eager to come at the truth of the matter as Orlando himself' (O 28). Therefore, as Nancy Cervetti aptly points out, even when external dress clearly signifies *man* or *woman*, the text delights in erotic confusion regarding what *body* is under the garment, how that *body* has come to be,

⁸⁰ Virginia Woolf, *Orlando: A Biography*, ed. Rachel Bowlby (1928; Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008), 13. All further references in the text (in parentheses) are to this edition, abbreviated O.

⁸¹ Judy Little. '(En)gendering Laughter: Woolf's *Orlando* as Contraband in the Age of Joyce,' *Women's Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal* XV (1988), 183. Quoted in Nancy Cervetti, 'In the Breeches, Petticoats, and Pleasures of *Orlando*,' *Journal of Modern Literature* 20:2 (1996), 166.

and how it performs.⁸² As intended of him, the young man courts numerous ladies, none of which are good enough for him for some reason or other. It is not until he meets the mysterious Russian Princess Sasha that he falls passionately in love.

[A] figure, which whether boy's or woman's, for the loose tunic and trousers of the Russian fashion served to disguise the sex, filled him with the highest curiosity. The person, whatever the name or sex, was about middle height, very slenderly fashioned, and dressed entirely in oyster-coloured velvet, trimmed with some unfamiliar greenish-coloured fur. But these details were obscured by the extraordinary seductiveness, which issued from the whole person. (O 36)

Notably, just like Orlando's own outfit at the novel's opening, the Russian fashion disguises her sex instead of revealing it. What he finds so appealing about Sasha is precisely her gender-ambiguity; it is her personality that intrigues him, not her gender. He calls his love 'a melon, a pineapple, an olive tree, an emerald, and a fox in the snow' (O 36), all gender-free things. Sasha shows up at their secret encounters 'in her cloak and trousers, booted like a man' (O 57), and when she eventually disappears, the heartbroken Orlando remembers her wearing 'Russian trousers ... and pearls about her neck' (O 70),⁸³ playfully juxtaposing emblems of masculinity and femininity, further enhancing her appeal.

A similar instance of clothing and gender-related confusion presents itself in the humorous form of Archduchess Harriet, a 'very tall lady in riding hood and mantle' (O

⁸² Cervetti, 166.

⁸³ The pearls echo Woolf's description of Vita: 'I like her & being with her, & the splendour – she shines in the grocers shop ... with a candle lit radiance, stalking on legs like beech trees, pink glowing, grape clustered, pearl hung. That is the secret of the glamour, I suppose. ... Then there is some voluptuousness about her; the grapes are ripe; & not reflective. ... For of course, mingled with all this glamour, grape clusters & pearl necklaces, there is something loose fitting.' D III, 52.

109), wearing a 'headdress into the bargain of some antiquated kind which made her look still taller (O 110), 'dressed somewhat ridiculously too in a mantle and riding cloak though the season was warm' (O 111). The difference is, however, that Orlando is not attracted to this peculiar person. Later on in the novel, once Orlando has become a woman, Harriet returns 'in her old black riding-habit and mantle' (O 170). Now, the truth is, quite literally, about to be unveiled: in the Archduchess's place stands 'a tall gentleman in black. A heap of clothes lay in the fender' (O 171). Harry confesses to have fallen hopelessly in love with Orlando after seeing his picture, believing him to be female because he looked like his sister. Finding herself alone with a man, Orlando feels faint but soon composes herself. Notably, as if standing on a stage, they act 'the parts of man and woman for ten minutes with great vigour' before falling into 'natural discourse' (O 171). Finally, when the clothes have come off, they can be themselves, free from performing their gender-assigned roles.

The ultimate example of clothing and comical gender-ambiguity is Orlando's sea-faring husband, Shel, who magically appears when she needs for the first time needs a husband as prescribed by the exacting Victorian Age. Engaged a few minutes after their first encounter, the now female Orlando ardently confesses her love, begging him not to leave her for the high seas. No sooner have the words left her mouth than an awful suspicion rushes into both their minds simultaneously:

'You're a woman, Shel!' she cried. 'You're a man, Orlando!' he cried. Never was there such a scene of protestation and protestation as then took the place since the world began. (O 240)

Even though neither of this is true, they realize and accept their partner's sexual ambiguity. After this outcry, they carry on calmly as if nothing had happened. After all, they are the same people either way.

Sasha, Harry and Shel all represent Woolf's point that it is not the outer form that matters, but the person underneath; every person is composed of masculine as well as feminine traits, which should be embraced instead of repressed. Moreover, Woolf points out the ridiculousness in the way that each gender must to play a particular role when in the company of the opposite sex. Furthermore, Woolf is arguably attacking England's obsession with heterosexuality. As a man, Harry/Harriet never could have courted Orlando, and similarly, Orlando is devastated when noticing Sasha from a distance in her indistinct clothing. Inferring that she is a man because she is such a good skater, he worries that he will never be able to be with her.

Garters, Ribbons and Gold-Laced Pomposity

In the early seventeenth century, Orlando is appointed Ambassador Extraordinaire in Constantinople under the reign of King Charles I. His life, characterized by feasts and debauchery takes a bizarre turn one morning, as he wakes up from one of his weeklong slumbers.

He stretched himself. He rose. He stood upright in complete nakedness before us, and while the trumpets pealed Truth! Truth! Truth! We have no choice left but confess – he was a woman. (O 132)

Without any sign of discomposure, Orlando looks himself up and down in the looking glass before heading to the bathroom. Importantly, the narrator ascertains the presumably startled reader that his subject has not changed at all.

Orlando had become a woman – there is no denying it. But in every other respect, Orlando remained precisely as he had been. The change of sex, though it altered their future, did nothing whatever to alter their identity. Their faces remained, as their portraits prove, practically the same. (O 133)

During his sleep, Orlando has been robbed by insurgents who, importantly, remove his Ribbon and Garter and nothing else. As a young boy, Queen Elizabeth I had ceremoniously hung about Orlando's neck chains of office; and 'bidding him bend his knee, tied round it at the slenderest part the jewelled order of the Garter' (O 24). After that, his biographer comments, nothing was denied him. In these emblems decorating his body, his power is embedded. Underlining the significance of clothes: when Orlando chooses to associate with commoners, he wraps himself 'in a grey cloak to hide the star at his neck and the garter at his knee' (O 28). When he tires of their company, he hangs his 'grey cloak in his wardrobe,' lets his 'star shine at his neck and his garter twinkle at his knee' (O 30), and appears once more at the court of King James.

Here, Woolf takes her exploration of the inequality of gender roles to the next level. Waking up without all his accoutrements, Orlando has, symbolically as well as literally, been stripped of his rank and power, thereby demoted to a woman. Nonetheless, as some critics point out, his sexual transformation is actually liberation. After all, it takes place following a patriarchal ceremony followed by a revolution of the locals. Having performed his diplomatic duties so admirably, Orlando had, before falling asleep, awarded the Order of the Bath and elevated to a dukedom, making it a splendid occasion for a feast in his mansion, as Woolf has the Gazette report.

[A]s the clock struck twelve, the Ambassador appeared on the centre Balcony which was hung with priceless rugs. ... Next, Sir Adrian Scrope, in the full dress of a British Admiral advanced; the Ambassador knelt on one knee; the Admiral placed the Collar of the Most Noble Order of the Bath round his neck, then pinned the Star to his breast; after which another gentleman of the diplomatic corps advancing in a stately manner placed on his shoulders the ducal robes, and handed him on a crimson cushion, the ducal coronet. (O 125)

According to Marder, this scene is a manifestation of patriarchal absurdity. ‘The total effect is to set the elaborate English ceremony against an incongruous pseudo-oriental background, and, as happens frequently in *Orlando*, to satirize the conventions of English officialdom.’⁸⁴ During Orlando’s sleep, the biographer is torn between figures of Truth, Candour and Honesty, urging him to confess that Orlando has become a woman, and on the other hand Purity, Chastity and Modesty on the other, pleading for secrecy. Thus the liberation is accomplished, Marder explains. Purity, Chastity, Modesty, who are allied with the repressive forces of ‘boudoir, office, lawcourt,’ with ‘virgins, city men, lawyers, doctors,’ (O 132) have been exorcised.

The truth of androgyny that releases from the bondage of the intellect plays lightly upon scene after scene, turning everything into fantasy. ... This whole sequence – the pompous ceremony, which shows Orlando in the clutches of patriarchal vanity, the riot which disturbs it, the furtive love affair, the seven-day sleep, and the final exorcism – illustrated a movement from repression to freedom.⁸⁵

⁸⁴ Marder, 112.

⁸⁵ Marder, 113-14.

Christy L. Burns, discussing Woolf's use of language and clothing as metaphor, claims that Orlando's sex change parodies the philosophical search for bare, naked, essential truths.

In this scene such classic motifs as unveiling and nakedness are re-organized around questions of sexuality, and what is 'revealed' or 'unveiled,' the 'truth' of Orlando's sex – that *he* is a *she* – points only to the essential instability of essence, the reversibility inscribed within the 'truth.'⁸⁶

The now female Orlando will soon realize that she is no longer able to perform the masculine activities and ceremonies she used to do.

I shall never be able to crack a man over the head, or tell him he lies in his teeth, or draw my sword and run him through the body, or sit among my peers or wear a coronet, or walk in procession, or sentence a man to death, or lead an army, or prance down Whitehall on a charger, or wear seventy-two different medals on my breast, all I can do, once I set foot in English soil, is to pour out tea and ask my lords how they like it. 'D'you take sugar? D'you take cream?' (O 151).

According to Rachel Bowlby, The Whitehall procession and the tea ceremony were Woolf's standard characterizations of the traditional masculine and feminine roles, which she regularly addressed in her fiction: the masculine role allowing for domination and pomposity and the female role for servitude and submissiveness.⁸⁷ In fact, the liberated Orlando does not miss that aspect of her lost masculinity. Quite on the contrary, she is

⁸⁶ Christy L. Burns, 'Re-Dressing Feminist Identities: Tensions between Essential and Constructed Selves in Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*,' *Twentieth Century Literature* 40:3 (1994), 350.

⁸⁷ Rachel Bowlby, 'Explanatory Notes,' in *Orlando: A Biography*, ed. Rachel Bowlby (1928; Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008), 328.

relieved, thanking heaven that she was not prancing down Whitehall on a war-horse, or even sentencing a man to death.

‘Better it is’, she thought, ‘to be clothed with poverty and ignorance, which are the dark garments of the female sex; better to leave the rule and discipline of the world to others; better be quit of martial ambition, the love of power, and all the other manly desires if so one may more fully enjoy the most exalted raptures known to the human spirit, ... ‘contemplation, solitude, love.’ (O 153-54)

Rule, disciplining the world, martial ambition and love of power are all examples of manly desires, which Orlando has no interest in any longer. Perhaps he never did at all, it was just something expected of him as a nobleman.

Woolf harboured a strong disdain for the military and the educated professions that excluded women. Ten years after publishing *Orlando*, she again addressed her aversion to testosterone-driven warfare in a book-length essay entitled *Three Guineas*, interweaving her disdain with another matter close to her heart: women’s rights. Here she highlights and mocks their undeniably effeminate uniforms, whether that of soldiers, judges or university professors. She even includes photographs of judges, guards, and bishops, illustrating, according to Susan Gubar, how male uniforms can become first a symbol and then simply a strategy for climbing the hierarchical ladder of sexual stereotyping.⁸⁸

Now you dress in violet; a jewelled crucifix swings on your breast; now your shoulders are covered with lace; now furred with ermine; now slung with many linked chains set with precious stones. Now you wear wigs on your heads; rows

⁸⁸ Susan Gubar, ‘Blessings in Disguise: Cross-dressing as Re-Dressing for Female Modernists,’ *The Massachusetts Review* 22:3 (1981), 484.

of graduated curls descend to your necks. Now your hats are boatshaped, or cocked; now they mount in cones of black fur; now they are made of brass and scuttle shaped; now plumes of red, now of blue hair surmount them. Sometimes gowns cover your legs; sometimes gaiters. Tabards embroidered with lions and uniforms swing from your shoulders; metal objects cut in star shapes or in circles glitter and twinkle upon your breasts. Ribbons of all colours – blue, purple, crimson – cross from shoulder to shoulder ... the splendour of your public attire is dazzling.⁸⁹

This detailed description poignantly demonstrates how men, with all their uniforms' accoutrements, wear their rank on their sleeves. As Marder sums up: to Woolf, 'the practice of grading and ranking, the splendour of ceremonial dress, the barbaric urge to aggression' are all related, all forming part of the patriarchal institutions, the mysteries of the male sex,⁹⁰ as is made evident in this passage:

What connection is there between the sartorial splendours of the educated man and the photograph of ruined houses and dead bodies? Obviously the connection between dress and war is not far to seek; your finest clothes are those that you wear as soldiers, since the red and the gold, the brass and the feathers are discarded upon active service, it is plain that they are expensive and not, one might suppose, hygienic splendour is invented partly in order to impress the beholder with the majesty of the military office, partly in order through their vanity to induce young men to become soldiers. Here, then, our influence and

⁸⁹ Virginia Woolf, *Three Guineas* (1938), in *Selected Works of Virginia Woolf* (London: Wordsworth, 2005), 796. All further references in the text (in parentheses) are to this edition, abbreviated TG.

⁹⁰ Marder, 87.

our difference might have some effect; we, who are forbidden to wear such clothes ourselves, can express the opinion that the wearer is not to us a pleasing or an impressive spectacle. He is on the contrary a ridiculous, a barbarous, a displeasing spectacle. (TG 798)

Elaborate uniforms are, as Woolf explains, used by men to lure other men to engage in warfare, appealing to their vanity. Speaking on behalf of women, such display is not only distasteful but downright sinister and a symbolic reflection of the patriarchy. As Marder concludes: ‘In this seemingly trivial custom of wearing buttons, rosettes and stripes, she felt that she could detect the seeds of war.’⁹¹

In *Three Guineas*, Woolf furthermore discusses how for women, besides the primary function of covering the body, a dress creates beauty for the eye and attracts men’s admiration. She then draws attention to the fact that until 1919, marriage was the only profession open to women. Therefore, ‘the enormous importance of dress to a woman can hardly be exaggerated, it was to her what clients are to you – dress was her chief, perhaps her only, method of becoming Lord Chancellor’ (TG 797). On the other hand, menswear ‘in its immense elaboration has obviously another function, it not only covers nakedness, gratifies vanity, and creates pleasure for the eye, but it serves to advertise the social, professional or intellectual standing of the wearer’ (TG 797). It fulfils, she concludes, the same function as the tickets in a grocer’s shop. ‘It is this function – the advertisement function – of your dress that seems to us most singular’ (TG 797).

Simply put, Woolf was appalled by the way men’s vain and pompous uniforms signify rank and power while for women, similarly complex dress represented

⁹¹ Marder, 85.

confinement and submission.⁹² And via the surprising turn of events for her protagonist, she addresses that disdain, demoting but at the same time utterly liberating her.

A Double Masquerade: Gender and Orientalism

Having been turned into a woman, nonchalant Orlando puts on ‘those Turkish coats and trousers which can be worn indifferently by either sex’ (O 134). However, despite the gender-ambiguous attire of the country she dwells in, she is, according to the biographer, forced to consider her position. Fusing emblems of masculinity and femininity, she sticks ‘a pair of pistols in her belt’ and winds about her body ‘several strings of emeralds and pearls of the finest orient which had formed part of her Ambassadorial wardrobe’ (O 135), again underlining the vanity and vagueness of the ceremonial uniform.

Eventually, Orlando finds shelter with a wandering band of gypsies. According to Rachel Bowlby, the gypsies are represented as a community unconcerned with the categories, which will preoccupy the protagonist’s future judges, ‘perhaps most intriguingly of all ... they do not make any apparent (visible) distinction between two sexes.’⁹³ In other words, for this cultural section, gender-based clothing does not exist.

Reputedly a descendant of gypsies, Vita Sackville-West enjoyed projecting those aspects of her identity. In fact, according to Kirstie Blair, this was a general trend in that

⁹² Woolf often addresses her aversion to warfare and power as manifested in male uniforms. In *Mrs Dalloway*, the Prime Minister is ‘all rigged up in gold lace’, trying to ‘look somebody’ but not quite succeeding. The guests all but ignore him, ‘this majesty passing; this symbol of what they all stood for, English society’ (MD 236). Peter Walsh, who lived in India, thinks to himself ‘Lord, lord, the snobbery of the English! How they loved dressing up in gold lace and doing homage’ (MD 236). Also, Court servant Hugh Whitbread performs his duties in ceremonial uniform. Similarly, Mrs Ramsay, in *To the Lighthouse* insinuates the greatness of man’s intellect ... the subjection of all wives... to their husband’s labours’ wishing that she could ‘see him, gowned and hooded, walking in a procession’ (TTL 13).

⁹³ Rachel Bowlby, ‘Introduction’ to *Orlando: A Biography*, ed. Rachel Bowlby (1928; Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008), xl.

period. The decades between 1910 and 1930 were marked by an explosion in writings on gypsies that placed the gypsy at the centre of commentaries on exoticism, primitivism, nature, sexuality, and savagery. Blair explains how a popular image of the gypsy was reworked to serve as an image of the lesbian writer, but also how popular accounts of the gypsy were themselves always haunted by implications of deviant sexuality, wayward femininity, and other transgressions against dominant societal standards.⁹⁴ In addition, as Marjorie Garber points out, to English eyes, gypsy dress was also associated with a wider range of exotic Oriental fashion, among them a fashion for Turkish trousers, which seemed to be doubly invested with the erotics of gender ambiguity and of the Far East.⁹⁵

The link that *Orlando* makes between the Orient, gender ambiguity and aversion to male uniform, must to a large extent stem from a particular incident. On the morning of February 10th 1910, Woolf (then Stephen) along with five companions drove to Paddington Station and took a train to Weymouth. She wore a turban, a fine gold chain hanging to her waist and an embroidered caftan. Her face was black. She sported a very handsome moustache and beard.⁹⁶ That day, the group managed to trick officials of the Royal Navy into believing them to be Abyssinian officials, and they were ceremoniously received on board their new battleship, *The Dreadnought*. This event would go down in history as the *Dreadnought Hoax*.

Intended as a joke, the event had a massive effect on the young girl, permanently shaping her political outlook. According to Bell, ‘the theme of masculine honour, of masculine violence and stupidity, of gold-laced masculine pomposity,’ remained with her

⁹⁴ Kirstie Blair, ‘Gypsies and Lesbian Desire: Vita Sackville-West, Violet Trefusis, and Virginia Woolf,’ *Twentieth Century Literature* 50:2 (2004), 142.

⁹⁵ Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 310-315. Quoted in Koppen, 46.

⁹⁶ Bell, Vol I, 157.

for the rest of her life. ‘She had entered the Abyssinian adventure for the fun of the thing; but she came out of it with a new sense of the brutality and silliness of men.’⁹⁷ Jean E. Kennard points out that the *Dreadnought Hoax* was a power game, in which traditional emblems of superiority, masculinity, and whiteness were the counters.

It was played through costume. The participants were dressing up and were also cross-dressed, four of them in terms of race and one in terms of gender. On the simplest level, the Abyssinian costumes parodied the fancy dress aspect of the naval uniforms and thus effeminized the officers.⁹⁸

Apart from a lost account of the event written in 1940, Woolf’s short story ‘A Society’ (1921) is the only example of her addressing the *Hoax*. In the story, a society of women sets out, dressed in disguise, to explore different aspects of the men’s world they inhabit. As an Ethiopian Prince, a character by the name of Rose goes aboard one of His Majesty’s ships. Discovering the hoax, the flustered Captain visits her, demanding that the honour of the British Navy be satisfied with six taps on the behind with a cane. Interestingly, Rose is now disguised as a private gentleman, managing to deceive the Captain not once but twice, by maintaining her role as a man.

Woolf’s role in the *Dreadnought Hoax* was even more complex than that of Rose. The only woman in the group, she performed a double masquerade. As Kennard puts it, she was a woman disguised as a man but in garments that suggested female rather than male dress. The mediating factor that made this ambiguity possible was the simultaneous crossing of gender and of race. Woolf’s position was thus ambivalent in both her sexual and racial identities as an effeminized male and as a powerful African, Kennard

⁹⁷ Bell, Vol I, 161.

⁹⁸ Kennard, 151.

comments. Cross-dressing in itself has the effect of carnivalizing political and cultural power and thus of undermining it, but ambivalence, the apparent crossing over that crosses back, is even more destabilizing. Whereas the male victims and hoaxers received light taps on their behinds as punishment, Woolf's punishment was much more complex and symbolic, linking the *Hoax* with issues of gender and sexuality. The Officers in the Mess labelled her 'a common woman of the town.' Woolf's punishment is similarly structured as her role in the hoax. It ironically granted her power positing her as another disruptive figure. 'Both the prostitute as well as the woman claiming male privilege destabilized the pre-World War I idea of chaste female and protective male that is implicit in imperial power.'⁹⁹

Kennard therefore figures *Orlando* as Woolf's most direct attack, the culmination of her use of sexual ambiguity to decentralise established power, having begun with the *Hoax*. Here, the link between enforced heterosexuality, a strict binary gender system, and political and economic power is made overt, whereby Woolf demonstrates that the whole notion of gender is created for imperial militaristic and economic purposes.

Orlando's escape from the biographer and his/her subversion of binary heterosexuality are achieved in part by frequent transformations of gender. She appears to change sex so readily in the latter half of her biography that her actual transsexualism is rendered almost irrelevant, proving that the most destabilizing force is the ambivalent edge of sexuality, the crossing over that crosses back.¹⁰⁰

Similarly, Jaime Hovey interprets *Orlando* as an ambivalent articulation of English nationalism in the 1920s, an era in which the essentializing imperatives of Englishness

⁹⁹ Kennard, 152-153.

¹⁰⁰ Kennard, 162.

came to preoccupy the public. Pointing, for example, to British newspaper stories and editorials of the period linking together colonial immigrants and sexually emancipated white women as foreign and morally suspect subjects, Hovey argues that the novel thus seeks a place of national belonging for the polymorphously sexual, masculine identified white woman; a comic refiguring of post-war discourse in which race, class, nation, and sexuality were already embedded and combined.¹⁰¹

On a final note, Garber suggests that by dressing the female Orlando in Turkish trousers, Woolf must have known the tale of Franco-Peruvian socialist writer and pioneer feminist Flora Tristan (1803-1844) who had dressed as a Turk in order to enter Parliament in 1830. Thereby, she concludes, Tristan's experiences with this double masquerade suggest that questions of gender can be addressed, if not resolved, through a recourse to cultural 'otherness' as represented by the intervening figure of the phantom 'Oriental,' the woman in Turkish trousers.¹⁰²

Clothes Make the (Wo)Man

Having tired of the gypsies, Orlando finally sets sail for England 'in the dress of a young Englishwoman of rank' (O 147). By now, the seventeenth century is coming to a close. Using her pearls as currency, she buys herself 'a complete outfit of such clothes as women then wore' (O 147). Such an outfit might include a walking dress with corset and under-skirt edged with ribbon, a linen vest with collar, short jacket belted with a sash, hat

¹⁰¹ Jaime Hovey, "'Kissing a Negress in the Dark': Englishness as a Masquerade in Woolf's *Orlando*," *PMLA* 112:3 (1997), 394.

¹⁰² Garber, 316 in Kennard, 152.

with feathers, and parasol and kid gloves.¹⁰³ The voyage is eye opening; for the first time she realizes the enormity of her sex change.

It is a strange fact, but a true one, that up to this moment she had scarcely given her sex a thought. Perhaps the Turkish trousers which she had hitherto worn had done something to distract her thoughts; and the gipsy women, except in one or two important particulars, differ very little from the gipsy men. At any rate, it was not until she felt the coil of skirts about her legs and the Captain offered, with the greatest politeness, to have an awning spread for her on deck, that she realized with a start the penalties and the privileges of her position. (O 147)

Simply put, even though her *sex* has been altered, it is not until now that her *gender* comes into being. As Burns aptly puts it, Orlando's *gender* change cannot be effected until clothing – that external social trapping – pressures her to conform to social expectations of gendered behaviour. 'These expectations work like an outside that seeps in, and clothing attracts and activates these expectations.'¹⁰⁴ In other words, her female attire will dictate her behaviour and also the way she is treated by the opposite sex.

Sitting on deck, Orlando begins weighing the pros and cons of being a lady, shifting back and forth in her argument.

'Lord' ... 'this is a pleasant, lazy way of life, to be sure. But', she thought, giving her legs a kick, 'these skirts are plaguey things to have about one's heels. Yet the stuff (flowered paduasoy) is the loveliest in the world. Never have I seen my own skin ... look to such advantage as now. Could I, however, leap overboard and swim in clothes like these? No! Therefore, I should have to trust to the

¹⁰³ Cervetti, 167.

¹⁰⁴ Burns, 351.

protection of a blue-jacket. Do I object to that? Now do I?’ she wondered, here encountering the first knot in the smooth skein of her argument. ... ‘Lord! Lord!’ She cried again at the conclusion of her thoughts, ‘must I then begin to respect the opinion of the other sex, however monstrous I think it? If I wear skirts, if I can’t swim, if I have to be rescued by a blue-jacket, by God!’ she cried, ‘I must!’ Upon which a gloom fell over her. (O 148, 50)

While pleased with the laziness and luxury that being a lady entails, the notion of dependence on a man clearly outweighs such comforts in her opinion.¹⁰⁵ The skirts she must wear are uncomfortable, hindering her from free and natural movements; a tangible manifestation of women’s incapability of self-preservation and independence. As has already been mentioned, the extensive function of garments should be in harmony with their wearers’ natural tendencies, increasing their bodily power. Similarly, when garments interfere with movements, they at once begin to diminish rather than enhance our feeling of power and extension.¹⁰⁶

All of a sudden literally feeling it on her own skin, Orlando regrets the pressure she used to place on women to be ‘obedient, chaste, scented, and exquisitely apparelled’, underlining their destiny as passive objects of the male gaze. While restricting women’s movements, the corsets and the crinolines at the same time enhance men’s visual pleasure. Now, the shoe is on the other foot. ‘Now I shall have to pay in my own person for those desires,’ she realizes much to her dismay, for women are not made that way by nature.

¹⁰⁵ Interestingly, the policemen are metonymized by their uniform, the blue jacket. In other words, when wearing a skirt, Orlando must be rescued by a jacket.

¹⁰⁶ Flügel, 38.

‘There’s the hairdressing,’ she thought, ‘that alone will take an hour of my morning; there’s looking in the looking-glass, another hour; there’s staying and lacing; there’s washing and powdering; there’s changing from silk to lace and from lace to paduasoy.’ (O 150)

As Cervetti cleverly puts it, a lady signifies ‘woman as an artefact designed from an assembly of parts.’¹⁰⁷ Such an assembly requires enormous labour, importantly occupying their time and hindering them from useful and productive activities, for example studying, reading and writing, forming and expressing their own opinions.

Finally, Woolf does not resist mocking the strict Victorian morality she grew up in, where a leg was never to be shown or even mentioned. Here, she makes such an occurrence seem a question of life or death. Tossing her foot impatiently, she shows an inch or two of calf.

A sailor on the mast, who happened to look down at the moment, started so violently that he missed his footing and only saved himself by the skin of his teeth, ‘if the sight of my ankles means death to an honest fellow who no doubt has a wife and family to support, I must, in all humanity, keep them covered’ Orlando thought. ... And she fell to thinking what an odd pass we have come to when all a woman’s beauty has to be kept covered lest a sailor may fall from a masthead. (O 151)

The voyage on the tellingly entitled *Enamoured Lady* takes Orlando from the East to the West, from gender ambiguity to gender obsession. It is not until she puts on the vestments of a proper English lady that her gender changes. Now, she begins for the first time to fully realize what being a lady entails.

¹⁰⁷ Cervetti, 167.

Having established a life on English soil, Orlando soon grows impatient with eighteenth-century society, with its coffee-houses and salons where, as cleverly put by Julia Briggs, men congratulate themselves on their wit, and women listen admiringly and pour the tea. As she feels imprisoned by social expectations and the limits on her freedom, and irritated by the misogyny of Addison, Pope and Lord Chesterfield, she begins reverting to masculine attire.¹⁰⁸ Soon, her biographer must retract the previous assurance that Orlando is exactly the same person as before the sex change.

She was becoming a little more modest, as women are, of her brains, and a little more modest, as women are, of her person. ... The change of clothes had, some philosophers will say, much to do with it. Vain trifles as they are, clothes have, they say, more important offices than keeping us warm. They change our view of the world and the world's view of us. (O 179)

It was her skirt – more precisely its cut – that had caused the Captain to pamper her so, Orlando realizes. He would not have done that had it, ‘instead of flowing, been cut tight to her legs in the fashion of breeches.’ In the same way, she would not have been required to curtsy, comply to and flatter him ‘had his neat breeches been a woman’s skirts, and his braided coat a woman’s satin bodice’ (O 180). Thus, the biographer concludes, there is much to support the view that

it is clothes that wear us and not we them: we may make them take the mould of arm or breast, but they mould our hearts, our brains, our tongues to their liking ... The man has his hand free to seize his sword, the woman must use hers to keep the satins from slipping from her shoulders. The man looks the world full in the face, as if it were made for his uses and fashioned to his liking. The woman

¹⁰⁸ Julia Briggs, *Virginia Woolf: An Inner Life* (London: Penguin, 2005), 203.

takes a sidelong glance at it, full of subtlety, even of suspicion, had they both worn the same clothes, it is possible that their outlook might have been the same.

(O 180)

With trousers comes the freedom to charge and attack, bestowing men with confidence and power; with layers upon layers of petticoats and crinolines comes obstruction, making women tread carefully, rendering them passive and docile. According to fashion historian Lawrence Langner, men originally devised divided garments to give themselves mobility and undivided skirts to hamper women in their movements, a gender distinction that simultaneously assured the continuity of the race by announcing and guaranteeing that women would be non-combatants.¹⁰⁹ Simply put, men and women's clothes are designed with different purposes in mind, underlining their roles in society.

After commenting that clothes are a manifestation of what lies beneath, and that a change in Orlando herself dictated her choice of a woman's dress and of a woman's sex, the narrator immediately corrects himself.

Different though the sexes are, they intermix. In every human being a vacillation from one sex to the other takes place, and often it is only the clothes that keep the male or female likeness, while underneath the sex is the very opposite of what it is above. (O 181)

Orlando is a peculiar mixture of the sexes, with each taking turns being in charge; a refreshingly original specimen of a human being, rid of the downsides of each gender. The biographer notes that despite being a woman, she still never takes more than ten minutes to dress and her clothes are chosen rather at random and sometimes worn rather

¹⁰⁹ Lawrence Langner, *The Importance of Wearing Clothes* (New York: Hastings House, 1959), 53, 65. Quoted in Gubar, 27.

shabbily. At the same time, she does not have the formality of men or their love of power. While being sensitive and kind, she can also drink with the best and ride well. What Woolf is pointing out here is that the genders are not carved in stone; they can both possess and lack various qualities, traditionally assigned to each gender.

Cross-Dressing and Modernism

Conveniently and frequently changing ‘from one set of clothes to another’ Orlando goes about her life, finding no difficulty sustaining the different parts,

for her sex changed far more frequently than those who have worn only one set of clothing can conceive, nor can there be any doubt that she reaped a twofold harvest by this device; the pleasures of life were increased and its experiences multiplied. For the probity of breeches she exchanged the seductiveness of petticoats and enjoyed the love of both sexes equally. (O 211)

She enjoys the best of both worlds, doubling life’s pleasures and multiplying its experiences. In this manner of shifting between the two genders, on a typical day Orlando might spend

her morning in a China robe of ambiguous gender ... receiving a client or two in the same garment, then ... clip the nut tree for which knee-breeches were convenient; then she would change into a flowered taffeta which best suited a drive to Richmond and a proposal of marriage from some great nobleman; and so back again to town, where she would don a snuff-coloured gown like a lawyers and visit the courts to hear how her cases were doing ... when night came, she would more often than not become a nobleman complete from head to toe and walk the streets in search of adventure. (O 211-12)

According to Susan Gubar, costuming plays a crucial symbolic role in the response of women to their confinement within patriarchal structures. It is a means of escape; a means of re-invention. She explains how female modernists escaped the strictures of the femininity as defined by society by appropriating the costumes they identified with freedom, i.e. male clothing. Cross-dressing in the modernist period was therefore not only a personal or sexual statement on the part of women. It was also a social and political statement that exploited the rhetoric of costuming to redefine the female self. It became a way of *ad-dressing* and *re-dressing* the inequities of culturally-defined categories of masculinity and femininity;¹¹⁰ of shattering the strict heterosexual binary gender system and of acquiring as well as ridiculing the inherent power of male dress. Female modernists who wore masculine clothing as well as using it as motif in their art include painters Frida Kahlo and Romaine Brooks, and writers Gertrude Stein and Radclyffe Hall, who, in the same year as *Orlando* was published, was prosecuted for her Sapphic novel *The Well of Loneliness*. Woolf was among those who testified at her trial on her behalf.

This crossing over had in fact begun a few decades earlier, Gubar continues. Dr. Mary Walker (1833-1919) fought for change in women's dress, convinced of the political significance of costuming for women. In the 1850s, she and other advocates for women's rights wore the Bloomer outfit, which, introduced by Amelia Bloomer, consisted of a loosely fitted tunic (or coat dress) reaching below the knees over pantaloons, notably resembling what Oriental women wore. Dr. Walker fought not only for women's rights to dress as they please, but also specifically for clothing that would allow freedom of movement, as well as equal distribution of warmth. Stating her case, she highlighted the

¹¹⁰ Gubar, 478.

dirt of long skirts, the elastics cutting off circulation on the legs, the compression of vital organs by tight-lacing, the fire hazards of large crinolines, the threat to the unborn, and the crippling of feet from small shoes. Dr. Walker, who served as a physician during the Civil War, emphasised the martial arts of women like Joan of Arc, Margaret of Anjou, Boadicea and Isabella of Spain.¹¹¹ As World War I approached, Dr. Walker began ostentatiously dressing up in male costumes, not just for comfort and dignity, but also to appropriate and display conventionally male attainments and status.

From the 1890s until her death, Mary Walker dressed herself increasingly in masculine evening dress, in a man's coat and pants, stiff collar and tie, with a tall silk top hat and her Medal of Honour in a prominent position, as elegant as a diplomats costume or a general uniform her outfit had itself clearly become a badge of honour, symbol of the proud time when she had been traded "man for man" for a Confederate soldier.¹¹²

Orlando's first decision to dress in male garb comes about as she looks at herself in the mirror – Woolf's frequently applied method for making a character come to terms with their true identity.

[S]he ... stood in front of the mirror, and arranged her pearls about her neck.

Then since pearls do not show to advantage against a morning gown of sprigged cotton, she changed to a dove grey taffeta; thence to one of peach bloom; thence to a wine-coloured brocade. Perhaps a dash of powder was needed, and if her hair were disposed – so about her brow, it might become her. Then she slipped her feet into pointed slippers, and drew an emerald ring upon her finger. (O177)

¹¹¹ Gubar, 479-481.

¹¹² Gubar, 481-482.

Dressed this way, Orlando is ‘astonishingly seductive’ and ‘loveliness incarnate’ (O 178), her beauty expressed in terms of men’s visual pleasure. Her way of compulsively changing dresses and fixing herself in the mirror betrays impatience and exasperation, rather reminiscent of an actor putting on a costume than a normal person getting dressed. Then, suddenly, she shifts gears.

She turned on her heel with extraordinary rapidity; whipped her pearls from her neck, stripped the satins from her back, stood erect in the neat black silk knickerbockers of an ordinary nobleman. (O 178)

The way she whips and strips off the tokens of femininity and stands erect in her knickerbockers, it is evident that she feels more at ease in male attire. This is her method of holding on to her masculine traits. On another such occasion, Orlando ceremoniously opens her cupboards and finds still hanging there, like old trusty friends,

many of the clothes she had worn as a young man of fashion, and from among them she chose a black velvet suit richly trimmed with Venetian lace. It was a little out of fashion, indeed, but it fitted her to perfection and dressed in it she looked the very figure of a noble Lord. She took a turn or two before the mirror to make sure that her petticoats had not lost her the freedom of her legs, and then let herself secretly out of doors. (O 206)

Here, it is of particular interest that she needs to ensure that her petticoats have not lost her the freedom of her legs, underlining the way clothing makes people change.

Secondly, this manifests that cross-dressing is more than a means of empowerment for Orlando; it is a means of achieving sexual gratification. To feel a woman ‘hanging lightly yet like a suppliant on her arm, roused in Orlando all the feelings which become a man,

she looked, she felt, she talked like one' (O 207). While Nell the prostitute unbuttons her glove that needs mending, ties a new handkerchief around her neck and adjusts her clothing so that it pleases her customer, Orlando chooses to reveal herself as a woman. This causes Nell great relief. Now, she can return to being herself instead of acting a part to please a man.

Orlando happily carries on this lifestyle until the nineteenth century, when her existence grinds to a halt. Having always been a passionate writer, androgynous in nature, consciously preserving and embracing both sides of her character, she suddenly feels stifled. The Victorian era was not kind to women, who were confined within their drawing rooms, utterly dependent on securing a husband, often deprived of education and a voice. To Woolf, the sufferings of female writers of that period, such as Charlotte Bronte and George Eliot, were not dead facts but living problems, as Marder points out.¹¹³ They assumed male pseudonyms, as it was the only way for them to be heard. For the first time, Orlando is in danger of losing her identity, despite her efforts to 'mew herself in her house ... and pretend that the climate was the same that one could still say what one liked and wear knee breeches or skirts as the fancy took one' (O 221). The only thing expected of her is to stay at home, wear a wedding ring on her finger and bear children.

Were they not all of them weak women? wearing crinolines the better to conceal the fact; the great fact; the only fact; but, nevertheless, the deplorable fact; which every modest woman did her best to deny until denial was impossible; the fact that she was about to bear a child? ... Tomorrow she would have to buy twenty yards of more of black bombazine, she supposed, to make a skirt. And then (here

¹¹³ Marder, 72.

she blushed) she would have to buy a crinoline, and then (here she blushed) a bassinette, and then another crinoline, and so on... (O 224, 225)

Clothing represents women's role within the house, maternal and wifely duties, which while just as important as the feats of men, will remain unrecorded. Yielding to the age, she dresses herself in suitably black bombazine,

dragged down by the weight of the crinoline which she had submissively adopted. It was heavier and more drab than any dress she had yet worn. None had ever so impeded her movements, no longer could she stride through the garden with her dogs, or run lightly to the high mound and fling herself beneath the oak tree. Her skirts collected damp leaves and straw. The plumed hat tossed on the breeze. The thin shoes were quickly soaked and mud-caked. Her muscles had lost their pliancy. (O 233-234)

Not only do the repressive Victorian age and the appropriate female clothing exemplifying it aggravate Orlando, her body literally changes as a result. She becomes physically weaker.

However, the novel's ending leaves the reader with hope. With her equally androgynous husband Shel by her side, Orlando survives the Victorian age, leaping into the twentieth century, depicted via department stores, abundant in product availability, bringing back memories of the Elizabethan merchant ships, filled with gemstones and furs as well as of her beloved Russian Princess Sasha.

With her epic tale of the androgynous *Orlando*, Virginia Woolf demonstrated that categories and labels are unreasonable and pointless. Instead of narrowing them down to categories of gender and rank, society should embrace every person's complex nature,

encompassing both feminine and masculine traits forming unique individuals. Moreover, by making Orlando traverse the past five centuries, she could shed a light on the way in which women were treated, literally manifesting it in clothing. Also, Woolf cleverly mocked the exclusively male educated professions and imperialistic warfare, coming to terms with her scarring experience of the *Dreadnought Hoax*. Finally, as has been demonstrated, Woolf was one of many female modernists who applied cross-dressing in their art and even in their personal life as a means to state their worth as human beings. As Karen Blixen (1885-1962), better known by her male pseudonym Isak Dinesen, once wrote: ‘while men can and should find in their trials a blessing in disguise, women must make disguise itself a blessing.’¹¹⁴

¹¹⁴ Isak Dinesen, ‘The Deluge at Norderney,’ in *Seven Gothic Tales* (New York: Vintage Books, 1972), 24.

Conclusion

Having analyzed Virginia Woolf's fiction over the course of the 1920s, a certain development comes to light. When writing *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) as well as the attendant short stories 'Mrs Dalloway in Bond Street' (1923) and 'The New Dress' (1927), Woolf's primary focus was exploring her personal love-hate relationship with everything that had to do with dress, a complex stemming from her strict Victorian childhood and the molestation she suffered within the confines of her home. Writing for British *Vogue* all those years later further fuelled her complex, causing her to coin the term 'frock consciousness' which explores feelings of inferiority and shame associated with being inappropriately dressed in public, infringing codes of fashion and of society itself, the conflict of mind and body, consumption and creation, femininity and masculinity.

In *Mrs Dalloway*, Woolf was intent on harshly criticizing and exposing the social system: an impassable barrier hopelessly dividing people. There, she metonymized the upper and the lower class via two women's designer gown and a mackintosh coat respectively. She expressed apprehension due to the fact that clothing, that external marker of social and financial status, enslaved women of both classes in a double bind, causing them to resent one another instead of working together in harmony. Simply put, in the early twenties, for Woolf, the motif of clothing constituted a marker for personal identity and class affiliation.

As time passed, Woolf became more comfortable in her own skin. She therefore began to explore more abstract ways of applying clothing in her fiction. As has been demonstrated, her autobiographical novel *To the Lighthouse* is characterized by haunting symbols such as twisted gloves, unfinished stockings and fading shawls, representing

absence and loss, death and decay. Via items of clothing and jewellery, she paid tribute to her late mother, eloquently fictionalizing memories related to and conjured by such objects. This approach echoed modernist T. S. Eliot's so-called objective correlatives of memory, emotion and even philosophical thought, which centred on choosing the ideal motifs to trigger the desired emotions in the reader. Again, she applied the motif of clothing to convey the great class divide, manifesting in an impecunious young scholar that people of both genders suffer from insecurities and discomfort due to not wearing good enough clothes, especially when dressing for dinner as was the custom of upper class families.

In *Orlando: A Biography* (1928), Woolf's soaring self-confidence and light-heartedness is evident. By now, she had reached maturity, blossomed into a successful novelist and publisher, earning substantial amounts of money and exploring her sexuality in a way that she had never dared to do before. Moreover she was now well versed in politics, having established a name for herself as a leading feminist. In her landmark book-length essay *A Room of One's Own*, published that same year, she urged other women to make their voices heard, wishing for their daily realities to become recognized as a valid subject matter, wanting to abolish the prevalence of masculine values in fiction proclaiming that 'Speaking crudely, football and sport are "important"; the worship of fashion, the buying of clothes "trivial"'.¹¹⁵ In *Orlando*, she turned clothing into elaborate and sophisticated metaphors of sex and gender and assigned their roles in twentieth-century society. She moreover boldly criticized the pomposity and vanity of the educated

¹¹⁵ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (1928), in *Selected Works of Virginia Woolf*. (London: Wordsworth, 2005), 609.

professions, still exclusive to men; an argument she revisited in her book-length essay *Three Guineas* (1931).

After this exploration, it can therefore be stated that Virginia Woolf, a leading modernist and one of the twentieth century's most important advocate for women's rights, broke new grounds in regards to the application of clothing in fiction. Instead of the 'ill-fitting vestments,' those external indicators of a particular set of values or social status each character represented, clothing now exposed Woolf's characters' inner realities, evoking all kinds of experiences and sensations. As has been revealed, Virginia Woolf took scenes from her personal life, whether pleasant or painful, and used them in her writings, probably as an attempt at catharsis.

Almost a century later, Virginia Woolf's fictional works are just as relevant, touching and inspirational as when they first were published. Her status as one of the greatest writers of the twentieth century can be attributed to many factors: her exquisite, often poetic prose; her ardent fight for equality in all shapes and forms; her sense of humour; her ability to convey grief. However, the fundamental reason for her universal appeal is perhaps first and foremost her extraordinary ability to tune into and to convey human emotions, human relationships, human desires, skilfully weaving them, as with her motifs of clothing and fashion, into the fabric of her fiction.

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