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The Signifying Role of the Dress in the Novel “In Search of Lost Time” (A La Recherche Du Temps Perdu) by Marcel Proust

Abstract: Marcel Proust knew how to write fashion. A fashionable dress makes a fashionable woman, and vice versa; a gorgeous, elegant woman makes her dress fashionable. The outfits of the best-dressed women in Parisian society are at one with their beautiful owners. As a result, the description of fine clothing in Marcel Proust’s novel “In Search of Lost Time” (A La Recherche Du Temps Perdu) is much more than just the accurate recreation of various dress codes and popular fashions of the time. The aim of the article is to explore how a costume “performs” in a work of literature. We assume that the attire does not simply highlight the natural beauty of a woman, but also gives a glimpse of her inner self, accentuating its strong and weak points. Through the agency of how she is clothed, we learn a lot about a woman, though the importance of Proust’s detailed descriptions has often been underestimated in academic literature.

Keywords: dress, Marcel Proust, novel, “A la recherche du temps perdu”, the Duchesse de Guermantes, pink, fashion, red, velvet, silk.

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The language of clothing has played a role of crucial importance in the novel since the eighteenth century. In the earliest realist texts – works by Defoe, Richardson, and Marivaux – telling details of dress are central to issues of characterization, description and historical reference. While dress continues to have its referential function in nineteenth-century novels, it also acquires an important symbolic role in the works of Balzac, Eliot, Flaubert, Tolstoy, and James. For these writers, clothing is not only a manner of reinscribing rank and class, but, in the case of women, it becomes emblematic of gendered space, an instrument used by society to fabricate women as well as a tool that women can use for self-fabrication. By the end of the nineteenth century, fashionable dress was socially acknowledged “as an entity to be glorified, described, exhibited, and dealt with philosophically; like sex, if not more so, it became a prolific machine for the production of texts and images”¹.

C. Kuhn and C. Carlson rightfully point out that whether describing an elegant gown in luxurious detail or registering a simple tunic, storytellers pay attention to clothes. Color schemes, patterns, or emblems may seem easy to identify and interpret, but literary dress can be deceptively multifaceted. Far from merely enhancing characterization or creating a visual snapshot, the vestimentary frame is a site of aesthetic, social, and political significance and rich material for analysis. Furthermore, aspects of the affiliations between the living body and its decorations can be represented in literature, but the written clothed body, as well as disembodied attire, may also function as a narrative element with multiple dimensions. Thus, while sartorial performativity is at issue, so is the employment of apparel or accessory as symbol, image, motif, or metaphor. Numerous authors have made powerful – even radical – use of dress; however, it is only with the development of fashion theory that scholars have been able to argue for the consideration of clothing and its implications as a generative critical lens, inviting new and exciting avenues of investigation².

As A. Ribeiro emphasizes, fashion is a thing in itself and at the same time it involves social customs, since people express themselves, their status, and

1 E. M. Stadler, *The Lady in Pink: Dress and the Enigma of Gendered Space in Marcel Proust's Fiction*, „Studies in 20th and 21 century literature”, Vol. 29, Issue 2, Article 9.

2 C. Kuhn, C. Carlson, *Styling Texts: Dress and Fashion in Literature*, New-York 2007, p. 1–2.

even their aspirations, via their appearance and clothing. Dress is a common metaphor of language, and creates a web of meanings, some explicit, some implicit: we are, to some extent, the creation of our clothes. "Reading" the dress in literary texts and art can be difficult, since nuances perceptible only to those wearing and observing the clothes in the past are now lost to us and cannot be retrieved easily. Thus, clothing can deceive and mislead, especially when represented in literature and art. It is therefore all the more important to have the facts of dress, the naming of names, before we can understand how to decode this language; a caveat to enter here is the difficulty of pinning down the exact names of garments, fabrics, and colours as they constantly change over time, and as understood by different people even within the same time span. The garments of the past are silent witnesses to history, both to epoch-making events and to every commonplace human transaction. Such things are tangible and physical, and involve the complex intersection of temporal, cultural and social factors³.

P. McNeil, V. Karaminas, C. Cole, authors of "Fashion in Fiction"⁴, examine the plethora of ways in which attire 'performs' in a wide range of contemporary and historical literary texts and explore the function of clothing within fictional narratives. The book provides an examination of the interconnected worlds of fashion and words, providing perspectives from socio-cultural, historical, and theoretical readings of fashion and text-based communication and emphasising the idea that the dress communicates, disrupts, and modulates meaning across different cultures and contexts.

P. McNeil, V. Karaminas, C. Cole believe that every epoch can be thoroughly examined through the mirror of dress. The climate, geographical position, ecology and historical background of every nation, as well as its cultural code, political, social, and religious peculiarities influence their fashions. Thus, fashion reflects society. People belonging to various groups, epochs, and walks of life consciously create their own identities with the help of dress. At the same time, while doing so, people rely on their knowledge, tastes, and experiences, and in such a way fashion gets influenced by society. And literary

³ A. Ribeiro, *Fashion and Fiction: Dress in Art and Literature in Stuart England*, Yale 2008, p. 3.

⁴ P. McNeil, V. Karaminas, C. Cole, *Fashion in Fiction: Text and Clothing in Literature, Film and Television*, Berg Publishers 2009.

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texts often record the realia pertaining to the world of fashion. It should also be noted that not all historical garments survived the test of time. Nevertheless, some of them never got lost solely due to works of literature. Personal, political, cultural, and religious ideologies are often expressed in dress, and literary texts become precious and even indispensable sources of getting the information about the face and spirit of each epoch, that was reflected in numerous garments, attire, and outfits.

The French *fin de siècle* author Marcel Proust was a well-known fashionista of his day and arguably the godfather of fashion. Fashionable salons, as the young author thought, almost ruled the world. "When I was small child", – he recollected, "all that belonged to conservative society was fashionable, and no republicans were welcome in the smarter salons. People living in such a milieu could imagine that the impossibility of ever inviting an "opportunist", much less a "radical", was a thing that would last forever, like gas lamps and horse-drawn omnibuses. But like kaleidoscopes turning from time to time, society successively places in various ways elements which were thought to be immutable and creates a new composition"⁵.

Being divided into seven volumes, the M. Proust's novel "In Search of Lost Time" (*A La Recherche Du Temps Perdu*) was published between 1913 and 1927. As an observer of the social scene, Proust described fashions in dress and commented on the role costume played in a society that placed great value on ritual and stylized observance of convention. For the artist, clothing had a complex signifying role as a rich indicator of many aspects of personal as well as cultural life.

Parisian high society of the Belle Epoque could boast of the three recognizable fashion-icons, influencers, and "their own brand ambassadors": Genevieve Halevy Bizet Straus; Laure de Sade, Comtesse Adheume de Chevigne; and Elisabeth de Riquet de Caraman-Chimay, Comtesse Greffulhe. Marcel Proust, a law student at the time, started worshipping those women from afar. Later on, he met them in person and commemorated their celebrated good looks, sheer sex appeal, and fabled brainpower, creating the fictional character of the Duchess de Guermantes in his famed novel. The exquisite dress sense nurtured by enormous wealth, glamour, great wisdom and wit, extraordinary beauty, fierce

⁵ M. Proust, *Quotes*, <https://www.quotetab.com/quotes/by-marcel-proust/4>

fashions, and high social status combined were really inspiring not only for the contemporaries, but for generations to come⁶.

Geneviève Straus (1849–1926), a Parisian salon hostess, a political activist during the Dreyfus Affair, and a close friend of Marcel Proust was the darling of French society. Her good looks inspired her first husband, composer Georges Bizet, to create a beautiful, vivacious, and flamboyant Carmen. Geneviève was a very fragile and glamorous Bohemian, widely known as the ‘Mauve Muse’ due to her half-mourning outfits she wore for years.

As C. Weber points out, Comtesse Adhémaume de Cheigné (1859–1936), née Laure de Sade, looked like a princess, but spoke like a peasant. Added to her fondness for shooting, riding, and man-tailored clothing, her tough talk moved one of her friends to brand her “Corporal Petrarch.” This sobriquet underlined the antitheses Mme de Cheigné somehow managed to embrace: womanly and virile, sacred and profane. Her bawdy posturing and provocative “mannish air”, as another of her friends termed it, intrigued several mondain gallants, several of whom were suspected of enjoying Mme de Cheigné’s favors in bed.

The Vicomtesse Greffulhe, twenty-five, held the undisputed advantage. Néé Élisabeth de Riquet de Caraman-Chimay (1860–1952), she was an amazingly beautiful daughter of an impoverished Belgian prince. She married a very wealthy man and enjoyed the enduring reputation of the most fashionable and well-dressed woman of her time. With her regal carriage, willowy frame, swan-like neck, and huge dark eyes the color of crushed pansies, she turned heads. Her contemporaries routinely compared her to Venus, the goddess of love, and to Diana, the chaste, ethereal goddess of the moon and the hunt. By her own admission, the vicomtesse’s prime objective in every circumstance was to project “an image of prestige like none other.” To achieve this effect, she was partial to fashions that provoked shock and awe⁷.

All the outings of the gorgeous Countess had always been nothing but carefully staged performances and high art. As M. Russel emphasises, in 1904 the Vicomptess Greffulhe even upstaged the bride who was her own daughter. The

⁶ E.M. Stadler, *The Lady in Pink: Dress and the Enigma of Gendered Space in Marcel Proust’s Fiction*.

⁷ C. Weber, *Proust’s Duchess: How Three Celebrated Women Captured the Imagination of Fin-de-Siècle Paris*, Knopf 2018.

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mother of the bride was wearing an elaborate and gorgeous dress that came to be known known as the "Byzantine" gown. This was an iconic Charles Worth creation made out of gold lamé, encrusted with pearls, and trimmed with fur. She came before the bride and paused on the steps of the church, allowing the crowds to look at her and take photos. When the beautiful countess entered the church, people could not believe she was the mother of the bride. In the years prior to the First World War, her fashions gravitated toward avant-garde Orientalist styles. When Proust described the exotic Fortuny gowns of his fictional Duchess de Guermantes, remarking "that Venice loaded with the gorgeous East", he was clearly inspired by the Countess Greffulhe. It's interesting to note that the elderly Vicomtesse recalled Marcel Proust to her grandchildren as 'a displeasing little man who was forever skulking in doorways'⁸.

The dress in M. Proust's novel is worshipped to a great extent and is often used to identity the personality. For instance, Odette de Crecy, the future Mme Swann, is introduced through her outfit. When the young narrator meets her for the very first time, she is a very pretty yet nameless "Lady in Pink". Long before that, his beauty becomes known as the gorgeous and elegant Madame Swann; she was briefly known as "The lady in White", who later evolved into a lady in pink.

The description of any dress, given by Marcel Proust, is incorporated into a broader philosophical paradigm, revealing the inner self of his literary character. The red color and its hues are extensively used by the author as a unifying force: *I looked like a blazing ruby or a blood- red blossom, but I do remember, as it happens, that I had on a red dress: it was red satin, which was being worn that season.*

In the eyes of a child, a pretty young woman, dressed in a pink silk dress and wearing a great necklace of pearls about her throat, looks very pleasing and attractive. She was just finishing a tangerine, and its orange color seemed to blend with her pink dress, representing a unity for a boy looking at her. Her appearance was not theatrical, and the narrator could not possibly believe she was a courtesan. Thus, the dress and the appearance as a whole are compared with the socially accepted norms of behavior, be it the markers of conformity, non-conformity, or even impropriety.

As an integral part of any elaborate outfit, the dress often becomes a distinct social marker:

⁸ M. Russel, *The Vicomptess Greffulhe*.

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[...] with a plume in her hat, a silk dress, a muff, an umbrella (which do for a parasol if the rain kept off), a cardcase, and a pair of white gloves fresh from the cleaners. Wearing these badges of rank, she would, in fine weather, go on foot from one house to another in the same neighborhood. [...]

Regarding the dress as the focal point of the whole outfit, Marcel Proust often emphasizes its fabric and color. Various hues of red define not only the attire but the inner world of all signature women-characters in Proust's world. Blazing ruby, fuchsia-red, pink, mauve, violet, blood-red and scarlet variations to one and the same main color evoke great sensuality, erotic fantasies, and sexual desire:

Her relaxed and languid attitude, which the entrance of the Duchesse in no way disturbed, contrasted with the brilliance of her Empire dress of a glittering silk beside which the most scarlet of fuchsias would have paled, encrusted with a pearl tissue in the folds of which the floral design appeared to be embedded;

[...] she was looking splendid in her emerald tiara and a pink dress with a long train, [...].

On one of these Lenten mornings, when she was on her way out to luncheon, I met her wearing a gown of bright red velvet, cut slightly open at the throat.

M. Proust always describes the dress in detail, revealing not only the family and educational background, financial or social status of his characters, but also their habits, moods and attitudes:

I would find her dressed in one of her lovely gowns, some of which were of taffeta, others of gros-grain, or of velvet, or of crepe-de-Chine, or satin or silk, gowns which, not being loose like those that she generally wore in the house but buttoned up tight as though she were just going out in them, gave to her stay-at-home laziness on those afternoons something alert and energetic.

Silk dresses "reign" in the Proust novel, being the most frequently mentioned. But to reign does not necessarily means to rule, and it often happens that a velvet dress is deemed to be more elegant and classier compared with a silk one, and the color black is pronounced more elegant than pink:

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But the Duchess cared little for garments which form a 'costume'. She herself, though she possessed several, never looked so well as in black velvet with diamonds.

The noun "velvet" and the adjective "velvety" become M. Proust's favourites in making similes, metaphors, and personifications:

[...] for this reason, their mature works are more able they have not the velvety quality of their youthful ones.

I perceived that life had been ceaselessly weaving threads about it which in the end became a beautiful velvet covering like the emerald sheath of a water-conduit in an ancient park.

[...]the light grew velvety,

Are they not, with the transparent velvet of their petals, as it were the mauve orchids of the sea?

Then, on the contrary, her narrow velvety gaze fastened itself upon, glued itself to the passer-by.

Marcel Proust's ideal dress is always a dress of high fashionable birth, belonging to a house of a well-known couturier. It is always elaborate and sophisticated:

She was wearing, under her cloak, a flowing gown of black velvet, caught up on one side so as to reveal a large triangular patch of her white silk skirt, with an 'insertion,' also of white silk, in the cleft of her low-necked bodice, in which were fastened a few more cattleyas.

The beautiful dress of a noble lady, no matter how gorgeous and expensive it may be, is often described by Marcel Proust as a thing of dubious nature. On the one hand, a mind-blowing outfit is very good in itself. An evening gown can be fascinating and even thrilling, giving inspiration and boosting self-confidence. On the other hand, the woman who wears it largely depends on a man, who pays for it. Thus, luxury and misery often go hand in hand, though one can hardly discern that.

What is more, the dress is often described historically, revealing the popular fashions of the past:

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And now and then in the blue velvet of the bodice a hint of 'slashes,' in the Henri II style, in the gown of black satin a slight swelling which, if it was in the sleeves, just below the shoulders, made one think of the 'leg of mutton' sleeves of 1830, or if, on the other hand, it was beneath the skirt, with its Louis XV paniers, gave the dress a just perceptible air of being 'fancy dress' and at all events, by insinuating beneath the life of the present day a vague reminiscence of the past, blended with the person of Mme. Swann the charm of certain heroines of history or romance.

A lot of attention is always paid at minute details in the women's outfits, such as the cut of the dress, type of the sleeves, low back or low neck option, and the decorative elements on the bodices and skirts:

[...] and these, as well as the trinkets, had the effect – for otherwise there would have been no possible justification of their presence – of disclosing a secret intention, being a pledge of affection, keeping a secret, ministering to a superstition, commemorating a recovery from sickness, a granted wish, a love affair or a 'philippine.

Strings of pearls, long trains, white gloves, and the descriptions of fashionable hats and high-heeled shoes, often make Proust's quintessential beauty. A great emphasis is also made on accessories, especially on the plethora of gems worn by the well-known trend-setters and fashion influencers in Paris:

Beneath the profusion of sapphire charms, enamelled four-leaf clovers, silver medals, gold medallions, turquoise amulets, ruby chains and topaz chestnuts there would be, on the dress itself, some design carried out in color which pursued across the surface of an inserted panel a preconceived existence of its own, some row of little satin buttons, which buttoned nothing and could not be unbuttoned, a strip of braid that sought to please the eye with the minuteness, the discretion of a delicate reminder.

Tiaras, diadems and necklaces are of greater importance for creating a memorable look than bracelets, earrings, brooches, pins, and the rest of the jewelry. Very often, the dresses in Proust complete the life-changing experiences of his characters. For instance, proper names like Miss Sacripant, Mme de Crecy, Mme Swann, and Mme de Forcheville reflect not only the metamorphosis in

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Odette's social status, but also the changes she undergoes. The phenomenon of her social rise is revealed through the fashions of the day. Thus, the dress has got the power not only to enhance the life of a woman, but also to complete it.

The dress in M. Proust is often synonymous to chic and mystery, surrounding the socialites of Proust's epoch. Great secrets and the flair of charm and mystery wrap the woman's body in the same way as the dress wraps it. M. Proust likes to compare the dress with the creations of high art. He also finds numerous parallels between the beauties of nature and the beauty of an outfit, thus rendering the attire of great artistic value and importance in the philosophical sense:

[...] with its natural lawns diversified by sulphur-colored roses falling over a rustic gateway flanked by two intertwined pear-trees resembling with its free-falling and flowering branches, the highly ornamental insignia of a bronze applique by Gauthier, ...

Her majestic velvet train and laces formed a passage of painting comparable to the most splendid of Titians.

Thus, each dress described by Marcel Proust in his novel can be regarded as a thing from the past, the projection of a particular aspect of a character's inner world, as a social marker, and an indicator of the existing boundaries, that constricted the life of a woman. The dress does not simply hug the figure or makes the woman more beautiful. It is often incorporated into a whole complex of philosophical problems and issues raised by the author and performs quite a few different functions of its own.

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