

MIDWESTERN  
MISCELLANY XLII

Fall 2014

*being a collection of essays on*

*fashion in Midwestern fiction*

*by members of*

The Society for the Study of  
Midwestern Literature

*edited by*  
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The Midwestern Press  
The Center for the Study of  
Midwestern Literature and Culture  
Michigan State University  
East Lansing, Michigan 48824-1033  
2014

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*Midwestern Miscellany* (ISSN 0885-4742) is a peer-reviewed journal published  
twice a year (Spring and Fall) by the Society for the Study of Midwestern Literature.

This journal is a member of the Council of Editors of Learned Journals



In honor of  
Naomi Long Madgett

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## PREFACE

This issue of *Midwestern Miscellany* offers five essays that focus on what Andrea Denny-Brown in *Fashioning Change: The Trope of Clothing in High-and Late-Medieval England* calls “the inherently transformative power of clothing itself.” (1). John Rohrkemper deals with the ways in which dress effects change in Mark Twain’s life and works in “Mark the Clothes: Mark Twain and Clothing as Social Signifier.” “Performative Fashion in the Short Fiction of Kate Chopin” focuses on that author’s cross-dressing protagonists and the ways in which they challenge conventional notions of gender, identity, referentiality, and representation. Scott D. Emmert takes a look at Edna Ferber’s final Emma McChesney story, “One Hundred Percent,” noting that this tale of Emma’s donning a uniform to do war work and manufacturing apparel for female war workers has ideological underpinnings: the story endorses American patriotic goals and is informed by the values of early twentieth-century feminism. Clyde Griffiths’s straw hat and its multiple functions are discussed in William Brevda’s “The Straw Hat in Dreiser’s *An American Tragedy*.” Rounding out the quintet is Guy Szuberla, who discusses the ironies of transformative fashion in noir writer W.R. Burnett’s “‘Dressing Up,’ or ‘Ain’t I Boul’ Mich’?”

## RECENT MIDWESTERN FICTION AND POETRY

### Fiction

- Berg, Elizabeth. *Tapestry of Fortunes*. Random House, 2013. [Minnesota]
- Butler, Nikolas. *Shotgun Lovesongs*. St. Martin's, 2014. [Wisconsin]
- Coake, Christopher. *You Came Back*. Grand Central, 2012. [Ohio]
- Gass, William H. *Middle C*. Knopf, 2013. [Ohio]
- Gloss, Susan. *Vintage*. William Morrow, 2014. [Wisconsin]
- Harrison, Jim. *Brown Dog: Novellas*. Grove, 2013. [Michigan, UP]
- Keillor, Garrison. *Guy Noir and the Straight Skinny*. Penguin, 2012. [St. Paul]
- Lasser, Scott. *Say Nice Things about Detroit*. Norton, 2012. [Michigan]
- Moore, Edward Kelsey. *The Supremes at Earl's All-You-Can-Eat*. Knopf, 2013. [Indiana]
- Paretsky, Sara. *Critical Mass*. Dutton, 2013. [Chicagoland]
- Rhodes, David. *Jewelweed*. Milkweed, 2013. [Wisconsin]
- Robinson, Marilynne. *Lila*. Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2014. [Iowa]
- Roy, Lori. *Until She Comes Home*. Dutton, 2013. [Detroit]
- Sandford, John. *Field of Prey*. Putnam, 2014. [Minnesota]
- Somerville, Patrick. *This Bright River*. Little, Brown, 2012. [Wisconsin]
- Smiley, Jane. *Some Luck*. Knopf, 2014. [Iowa]
- Snyder, Rachel Louise. *What We've Lost Is Nothing*. Scribner, 2014. [Chicagoland]

### Poetry

- Etter, Dave. *Blue Rain*. Red Dragonfly, 2012.
- Gerber, Dan. *Sailing through Cassiopeia*. Copper Canyon, 2012.
- Heller, Janet Ruth. *Exodus*. Cincinnati: Wordtech Editions, 2014.
- Knoepfle, John. *Shadows and Starlight*. Indian Paintbrush Poets, 2012.
- Kooser, Ted. *Together: New Poems*. Brooding Heron, 2012.
- Radavich, David. *The Countries We Live In*. Main Street Rag Publishing, 2013.
- Stillwell, Mary K. *Fallen Angels*. Finishing Line, 2013

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to the work of 2015 Mark Twain Award winner Philip Levine  
are especially encouraged.

MARK THE CLOTHES:  
MARK TWAIN AND CLOTHING AS SOCIAL SIGNIFIER

JOHN ROHRKEMPER

*“Clothes make, not the man but the image of man—and they make it in a steady reciprocal accord with the way artists make, not lifeless effigies but vital representations.”*  
(Anne Hollander, *Seeing Through Clothes*, xv).

It may be ironic that perhaps the scruffiest, most disheveled hero in American literature, Huckleberry Finn, was created by something of a fop, a dandy: Mark Twain. Twain, a relatively poor bumpkin from the West, married into Eastern money, settled in the poshest neighborhood of America’s richest city of the time, and came to world prominence in an age that celebrated wealth and sartorial finery. It is no surprise that he understood well the importance of clothing as a signifier of social standing. In this essay I will examine this idea in three Twain works, two well-known and one fairly obscure, but I must begin with a look at the way such an idea is manifest in Twain’s own life and his own fashion statements.

This issue of *Midwestern Miscellany* emphasizes fashion in fiction rather than in the lives of its authors, but no writer deserves to be thought of as a fictional creation more than Mark Twain, that avatar created by Samuel Clemens and examined as such by Justin Kaplan in his award-winning biography *Mr. Clemens and Mark Twain*, and by many others. Twain, himself a performer of his own works, understood the modern conception of the invented and performed self, and he advertised that self in the metafictional first words of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*: “You don’t know about me, without you have read a book by the name of ‘The Adventures of Tom Sawyer,’ but that ain’t no matter. That book was made by Mr.

Mark Twain, and he told the truth, mainly” (2). He also performed himself to the man who would become one of his lifelong friends and advocates, William Dean Howells. In recounting his earliest memories of Twain, Howells recalled:

At the time of our first meeting . . . Clemens was wearing a sealskin coat, with the fur out, in the satisfaction of a caprice or the love of strong effect which he was apt to indulge through life. With his crest of dense red hair and the wide sweep of his flaming moustache Clemens was not discordantly clothed in that sealskin coat, which afterward, in spite of his own warmth in it, sent the cold chills through me when I once accompanied it down Broadway and shared the immense publicity it won him. (*My Mark Twain* 4)

Today, of course, we don't think of Twain in the furry sealskin coat, but the pristine white suit. It is rare to see a popular representation of the author today that doesn't feature that dense crest of now snow-white hair, above an impeccably white outfit. In reality, this was an affectation of only his last few years. His biographer, Michael Sheldon, notes the exact date of Twain's debut of his new costume. On a gray December day in 1906, Twain came before a Congressional committee hearing testimony on copyright law, long a cause for Twain. He wore a black bowler and a dark overcoat, but when he peeled off the heavy coat he caused a sensation. He was dressed in white from head to foot, violating what had been a virtually iron-clad fashion taboo that had mandated that one must not wear white after the end of the summer season. Twain, and probably many of the congressmen, lobbyists, and reporters in the committee room had worn white suits in summer, but in this one gesture of fashion heresy Twain forever established an iconic look we still honor today. Sheldon summarizes the reaction: “‘Mark Twain Bids Winter Defiance,’ said the headline in the *New York Herald* the next day. ‘Resplendent in a White Flannel Suit, Author Creates a Sensation.’ *The New York World* called his costume ‘the most remarkable suit’ of the season, and another paper said he was a ‘vision from the equator’” (xviii). Sheldon concludes that “he planned this debut carefully, and knew how the world would react,” and notes that two months earlier Twain had privately confided, “‘I hope to get together enough courage to wear white clothes all through the winter . . . It will be a great satisfaction to me to show off in this way’” (xix). Samuel Clemens was well aware that his performance of Mark Twain required careful costuming.

Twain loved the performance of self. He plainly loved performance of any kind. One of the most popular public speakers of his day, at various points in his career he made more income from lecturing than from writing. But he also loved creating domestic performances with and for his children. Moreover, one of the peak experiences of Twain's life was when, in 1907, he received an honorary doctorate from Oxford University. His daughter Clara called it "one of the great moments in Father's career," and noted that he more than once exclaimed, "If only Livy [his late wife] could have known of this triumph" (270). And it was a triumph by anyone's estimation. Twain was lionized by the English public and press—one of the papers called it "The Mark Twain Pageant"—and everyone virtually ignored the other eminent honorees, a group that included the founder of the Salvation Army, William Booth; the 1907 Nobel literature laureate, Rudyard Kipling; and the eminent sculptor, August Rodin. And oh how he loved his academic robes! To an Oxford student he quipped, "I like the degree well enough, but I'm crazy about the clothes! I wish I could wear 'em all day and night" ("The Oxford Degree"). The university had made clear that because of the honorary degree he could wear his robes on any occasion. Presumably they meant any academic occasion, but Twain took the permission literally, donning the garb from time to time, even wearing the robes at the 1909 wedding of daughter, Clara.

Twain loved conquering England as he did at the Oxford ceremonies, almost as much as he loved savaging it as he did in his 1889 novel, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*. He had begun to develop deep reservations about England, particularly the English class system, in his earlier *The Prince and the Pauper* (1882), a novel, like the later *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, that hinges on an exchange of clothing. In that latter novel, Twain considers whether there is any difference between a Negro slave and a white slaveholder that can't be undone by switching cradles and baby clothes; in *The Prince and the Pauper* he examines whether there is any inherent difference between a prince and a poor boy from Offal Court. When, by accident, Tom Canty finds himself inside the royal palace, he ends up face to face with Henry VIII's heir, Edward, Prince of Wales. Edward is eager to hear of life outside the palace walls, and as Tom tells him of his life on the edge of society, the prince considers, "If that but I could clothe me in raiment like to thine, and strip my feet, and revel in the mud once, just once, with none to rebuke me or forbid,

meseemeth I could forgo the crown!” and Tom responds, ““And, if that could clothe me once, sweet sir, as thou art clad—just once” — ““Oho, wouldst like it?”” responds the prince. ““Then so shall it be. Doff thy rags, and don these splendors, lad.”” (44).

After exchanging clothes, “the two went and stood side by side before a great mirror, and lo, a miracle: there did not seem to have been any change made” (44). And so the prince notes: ““Thou has the same hair, the same eyes, the same voice and manner, the same form and stature, the same face and countenance, that I bear. Fared we forth naked, there is none could say which was you and which the Prince of Wales”” (45). The prince decides to sample life outside the palace for a brief time, but he soon discovers that such a ragamuffin as he appears cannot re-enter the royal walls, and he is forced for the first time to live by his wits. Likewise, Tom is forced to put on the finery and live a life for which he has not been prepared. But the two boys not only look alike, they share an intelligence, an ingenuity, and a heartiness that allow both of them to survive in their new roles. Still, no matter how the true prince tries to convince his subjects throughout the English countryside that he is the Prince of Wales, his clothing betrays him: obviously to anyone with eyes to see, he is but a poor waif—and nothing more.

Twain’s next novel was *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884) in which he continues his consideration of the social significance of clothing. Since Huck narrates his own story, it largely was up to E.W. Kemble, the book’s illustrator, to create a look for what was to become the most famous adolescent in American literature. Twain had been critical of Kemble’s first drawings for the novel, and particularly of what he realized would be the all-important frontispiece that would, in fact, be our first glimpse of Huck. I think Kemble does a good job, however, of capturing the mischievous but intelligent face, the puckish attitude, and the natural skill: the rough, uncivilized edges that characterized Twain’s portrayal of Huck. Earl Briden has written powerfully of the stereotypic elements of Kemble’s illustrations, throughout his career, but specifically in this novel, and especially in his portrayal of Jim, but Beverly R. David and Ray Saperstein argue that “Jim’s costume duplicates Huck’s outfit on the frontispiece exactly, a costume common to the various ethnic representatives of the nineteenth-century ‘natural man.’ The crumpled hat, baggy pants, and lone suspender formed the stock costume . . . connoting rustic naïveté rather than any specific ethnic type” (37).

I would explain this similarity in clothing a bit differently and suggest that the often racially insensitive Kemble at some level understood the common bonds that linked Jim and Huck. Twain had wished to suggest the common purpose of Huck and Jim, an idea that would have been criminal in the 1840s of the novel's setting, but still dangerous and possibly criminal in the Jim Crow era that was rapidly emerging in the America of the 1880s in which the novel was written. In this sense, clothing marks the common cause of a black and a white American, and perhaps, in Twain's thinking, what should be the shared cause of all black and white Americans in the late nineteenth century.

Huck doesn't describe his own appearance, but does verbally sketch most of the novel's other characters. Here's Pap: "His hair was long and tangled and greasy . . . It was all black . . . so was his long, mixed-up whiskers . . . As for his clothes—just rags, that was all. He had one ankle resting on 'tother knee; the boot on that foot was busted, and two of his toes stuck through . . . His hat was laying on the floor; an old black slouch with the top caved in, like a lid" (39). Later in the novel, Huck comes upon a man whom he seems to imagine as a potential father figure, most assuredly a not-Pap, Colonel Grangerford, the father of Huck's doppelganger, Buck Grangerford:

Col. Grangerford was a gentleman you see . . . he was clean-shaved every morning, all over his thin face . . . His forehead was high, and his hair was black and straight, and hung to his shoulders. His hands was long and thin, and every day of his life he put on a clean shirt and a full suit from head to foot made out of linen so white it hurt your eyes to look at it; and on Sundays he wore a blue tail-coat with brass buttons on it. (143)

While Col. Grangerford's physiognomy and attire signify the southern gentleman, the southern aristocrat, he is, in fact, one of the perpetrators of a murderous blood feud, happy to sacrifice his young son, Buck, in order to perpetuate that feud. He may look the gentleman, but his actual attitudes and behavior belie his appearance.

Perhaps clothes "oft proclaims the man" as Polonius asserts, but clothing also misproclaims the man as well, and, in the case of Colonel Grangerford, helps to unveil the corrupt, romanticized notions that in Twain's view underpinned the antebellum South. And, in fact, the various costumes and, specifically, disguises donned by many of the novel's characters point to the dialectic of honesty

and mendacity that animates this novel that begins, after all, with Huck's meditation on the nature of truth and truth-telling. The first time Huck goes on land after taking to the river with Jim, he disguises himself as a girl (most unconvincingly); Jim is at one point costumed to resemble an Arab in order to protect him from seizure by slavers; the "Duke" and "King," would-be masters of disguise, hope to transform themselves through costume in order to facilitate their con of the "rubes." As they plan a pseudo-Shakespearean performance, the King worries that his age and sex will make it difficult for him to be a convincing Juliet: "But if Juliet's such a young gal, Duke, my peeled head and my white whiskers is goin' to look uncommon odd on her, maybe." But the Duke reassures him of the power of clothes, of costume: "No don't you worry—these country jakes won't ever think of that. Besides, you know, you'll be in costume, and that makes all the difference in the world" (171). Later, Huck sneaks into the tent of a travelling circus; during the performance an apparently drunk man insists on mounting one of the show horses. The man becomes obstreperous, so the ringmaster tells his assistants to placate the man by allowing him to ride around the ring. The drunk begins to slide around on the horse's back, almost falling off and beneath the horse's hooves at several points, but finally he leaps up and stands on the horse's back:

He just stood there, a-sailing around as easy and comfortable as if he warn't ever drunk in his life—and then he began to pull off his clothes and sling them. He shed them so thick they kind of clogged up the air, and altogether he shed seventeen suits. And then, there he was, slim and handsome, and dressed the gaudiest and prettiest you ever saw. (194)

Huck, ever the naïf, doesn't realize that this charade is all part of the performance, but, rather, feels badly for the ringmaster whom he believes has been duped. Once again, we are given an example of clothing—seventeen suits!—as an indicator of status—the apparently baggy and lumpy body part of the indicator of the rider's drunkenness—and, specifically, as a disguise: clothing as pretense, as pose.

Samuel Clemens's understanding of the social signification of clothing is one manifestation of a recurring theme in Twain's work: the falseness of outward appearances, whether it is the gilding of a corrupt age, the playful shape shifting inherent in his given and pen names, or the donning of clothes as costume to fashion or refashion

one's identity. Nowhere is he more explicit about this theme than in one of his late and fairly obscure works, "The Czar's Soliloquy," written in response to Bloody Sunday, the 1905 massacre of as many as a thousand peaceful demonstrators who had marched to the Winter Palace, many carrying crucifixes or portraits of the Czar. Twain's motivation for the satiric essay came from his outrage at this barbaric massacre and also from a brief passage from the *London Times* that he took as his epigraph for the piece: "After the Czar's morning bath it is his habit to meditate an hour before dressing himself" (321). Twain imagines Nicholas II meditating on his own puny body before a full-length mirror:

Naked, what am I? A lank, skinny, spider-legged libel on the image of God! Look at the waxwork head—the face, with the expression of a melon—the projecting ears—the knotted elbows—the dished breast, the knife-edged shins . . . . There is nothing imperial about this, nothing imposing, impressive, nothing to invoke awe and reverence. Is it this that a hundred and forty million Russians kiss the dust before and worship? Manifestly not! No one could worship this spectacle, which is Me. Then who is it, what is it, that they worship? Privately, none knows better than I: It is my clothes. Without my clothes I should be as destitute of authority as any other naked person. Nobody could tell me from a parson, a barber, a dude. Then who is the real Emperor of Russia? My clothes. There is no other. (321)

A bit later in the soliloquy, Nicholas realizes that there are parallels between clothing and other ways we perform our social significance. He thinks to himself, "Titles—another artificiality—are a part of [a man's] clothing. They and the dry-goods conceal the wearer's inferiority and make him seem great and a wonder, when at bottom there is nothing remarkable about him" (322).<sup>1</sup> I suspect that Twain grants the czar more honesty and introspective insight than he probably ever actually practiced, but by the end of the piece the czar concludes that "there is but one restorative—Clothes." And he consoles himself with the panacea for his many faults before going off to rule Russia for another day: "I will put them on" (326).

I began this essay by examining Samuel Clemens's own performance of Mark Twain that was always aided by a carefully considered costume. After examining the rather bald and self-damning statements he gave the czar, it's hard not to wonder if Twain himself, indulging what he liked to call his "Presbyterian sense of guilt,"

might have been considering how he, too, needed “those respect-giving, spirit-uplifting clothes, heaven’s kindest gift to man, his only protection against finding himself out” (326).

But there is another way to consider Twain’s use of clothing as costume. In her insightful study of the use of clothing as social signifier in early eighteenth-century France, Amy Wyngaard examines the ways the dramatist Pierre de Marivaux and the painter Jean-Antoine Watteau dissected the liminal confusions of the Regency period at the beginning of a radical restructuring of French society:

Clothing became the highly charged symbol of this emerging conflict of social systems and hierarchies. In the spectacle of the city street, an individual’s garments and accessories allowed for the most visible and effective conveyance of signs of real and desired success . . . . Their plays and paintings not only demonstrate, but also literally perform, the destabilization of the traditional equivalence between rank and appearance. Sustaining a dialectic relationship with contemporary society, their works both imitated social practices and served as a paradigm to help construct them. (524)

One might argue that the America of Twain’s lifetime, like the Regency period, was a time of radical social change and reorganization. He was born during the presidency of Andrew Jackson—like Twain a westerner and southerner—who had wrested the presidency from the Eastern aristocracy and the revolutionary generation. During Twain’s lifetime America abolished slavery, established Jim Crow, embraced the gospel of wealth, and became an imperial world power. In Twain’s America—and in his works—clothing became the apparent social signifier of shifting class relationships. Mark Twain, the avatar of Samuel Clemens, was an exemplar of this phenomenon, and both his person and his works ask us to consider the ways in which clothing reveals and conceals the radical shifts of this emerging culture.

Moreover, Twain’s sartorial experiments and attention to clothing in his work may also have a close affinity with his aims as a writer. Anne Hollander, in *Seeing Through Clothes*, her seminal study of clothing and the body in the Western artistic tradition, suggests the similarity between clothing and literary genres:

One may say that individual appearances in clothes are not “statements,” as they are often called, but more like public readings of literary works in different genres of which the rules are generally under-

stood. A genre naturally develops as groups and individuals modify it, but always in terms of previous examples within it and rules that define it. Thus Western clothing is not a sequence of direct social and aesthetic *messages* cast in a language of fabric, rather, a form of self-perpetuating visual fiction, like figurative art itself” (xv).

Twain, in his sealskin coat and white suit in December, in the drag he sometimes donned for family theatrics, in the audacity of posing shirtless for a formal portrait in his late forties, in the eccentricity of wearing his Oxford gown at his daughter’s wedding, was challenging generic definitions of class and masculinity in the latter half of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries. Howells, himself always a fashion conservative, recognized the ways in which Twain challenged these fashion conventions and, in doing so, challenged his generation’s notions of class and particularly gender: “He had always a relish for personal effect, which expressed itself in the [various costumes he assumed] . . . . That was not vanity in him, but a keen feeling for costume which the severity of our modern tailoring forbids men, though it flatter women to every excess in it; yet he also enjoyed the shock, the offence, the pang which it gave the sensibilities of others” (4-5).

As a writer Twain was willing to shock, to give offense, and often did. While we think of him principally as a novelist, he explored and often expanded our understanding of many genres. In doing so he continually, almost habitually perhaps, challenged our expectations for various literary genres. He added humor, satire, and personality to the travel narrative in his first book, *The Innocents Abroad*. He wrote a relatively conventional Boy Book in *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, but then reinvented the genre in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* in which the sentimental conventions of the genre were replaced with a biting satire portraying a corrupt society and a serious psychological exploration of youth. His historical tales and novels largely eschewed the misty romance that had characterized the genre, replacing it with whimsy, satire, and serious social analysis.

Justin Kaplan and many others have implied that the gap between Samuel Clemens and his persona, Mark Twain, is a psychological flaw, a neediness that he could not satisfy. But if we heed the analysis of Wyngaard and especially Hollander, we might profitably conclude that Twain’s personal flouting of fashion conventions and his close critical attention to clothing and its signification in his work are

powerful ways of interrogating the class and gender conventions of his time. In this sense, the motive for his flamboyant fashions may well have been in harmony with his desire to alter or even reinvent the various literary genres in which he worked.

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#### NOTE

<sup>1</sup>Twain, of course did not have a hereditary title, but he did conflate, or at least others have thought he conflated the status of clothing with another conspicuous status symbol, the perfect symbol for the nouveau riche in the late nineteenth century: his famous house in Nook Farm, Hartford. Howells said of the house: "Clemens was then building the stately mansion in which he satisfied his love of magnificence as if it had been another sealskin coat" (7). Bill Brown shares Howells' basic point, but puts a more skeptical and perhaps unfairly harsh spin on the social significance of the house: "The nineteen-room house became a local attraction even before its completion in 1874. That, obviously, was the idea—Twain's idea about indelibly impressing his status upon the nation as its most widely read and best paid writer. As though performing a pastiche of the 'conspicuous display' that Thorstein Veblen would describe in 1899, Twain bought the adjacent Hartford property in order to have the shrubs pruned, the trees felled, and thus his mansion properly viewed by the whole neighborhood. Ostentation, of course, was really his second career" (442-443).

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## PERFORMATIVE FASHION IN THE FICTION OF KATE CHOPIN

MARCIA NOE, RACHEL DAVIS, AND  
BRITAIN WHITESIDE-GALLOWAY

Liberation in Kate Chopin's fiction always begins with the body. From Mrs. Mallard's freedom orgasm in "The Story of an Hour" to Mrs. Sommers's sensual shopping spree in "A Pair of Silk Stockings" and Mrs. Pontellier's emancipatory midnight swim in *The Awakening*, Chopin's protagonists begin their journey to selfhood with sense experience.<sup>1</sup>

Often this liberatory sense experience is mediated by clothing. Seventy-two of Chopin's stories, as well as her two published novels, contain references to fashion, clothing, accessories, footwear, and/or hairstyles. While many of these references are simple class markers—e.g. working-class characters wear calico and homespun while upper-middle-class characters wear silk and lace—dress often functions in Chopin's fiction to enable her protagonists to experience their physical selves in ways that allow them to explore multiple dimensions of selfhood and challenge prevailing gender norms.

The scholarly conversation on fashion in Kate Chopin's fiction focuses primarily on *The Awakening*, a novel in which clothing, it has been argued, is a metaphor for societal oppression (Collins, MacCurdy, Mathews, Stuffer). However, a handful of academics have explored Chopin's short fiction in the context of its publication in *Vogue*, a periodical in which Chopin published nineteen short stories (Harmon, Johnsen, VanKooten), while other scholars have discussed the political and social implications of fashion in her stories (Farca, Giorcelli, Joslin). In a time when women's fashion was mainly an expression of men's wealth, the heavy layers of clothing and tight corseting marking them as ladies of leisure, Kate Chopin

wrote of women who shed their clothing, as well as their men, as they began their journey to liberation and independent selfhood, like Edna Pontellier in *The Awakening* and Calixta in "The Storm," as well as of women whose immersion in fashion and shopping is unable to shield them from reality, like Mrs. Sommers in "A Pair of Silk Stockings" and Georgie McEnders in "Miss McEnders."<sup>2</sup>

Most Chopin scholars identify fashion in her stories as an indication of social conformity, which her stories condemn, or nonconformity, which her stories celebrate. Charles Harmon and Katherine Joslin each explore the juxtaposition of the natural, primal body and the synthetic barrier of clothing in her work. Harmon cites *Vogue* fashion plates depicting fashionable women in natural settings as indicative of Chopin's and *Vogue*'s association of women with the earth and of clothing with societal barriers. Joslin furthers this notion of the animal-woman by examining Chopin's Darwinian attitude toward clothing as an animalistic pleasure in "A Pair of Silk Stockings" or as a societal constraint on women's primal pleasure in "The Storm." As she puts it, "Fashion functions in Chopin's fiction as a marker between the rawness of animal nature and the fabric of human culture . . ." (74).

Clothing serves another function in Chopin's stories, one that can be illuminated by speech act theory, as articulated by J.L. Austin in *How to Do Things with Words*. Austin argues that some speech acts don't convey meaning or information as much as they perform functions, i.e. they get things done. Legislators who vote "aye" or "nay" aren't imparting much useful information; the main thing they're doing is passing a law. The "I do" of a nervous groom doesn't communicate his anxiety to his eager bride as much as it binds him to her in the social contract of marriage. Austin describes such speech as "performative" because it accomplishes an action rather than describes one. Many of Chopin's characters use clothing performatively to try out a risky new self-concept or to construct a more fluid gender identity, thus challenging nineteenth-century conventions of feminine identity and behavior, as well as the notion of a stable, unitary self. Moreover, functioning performatively on a metafictional level, they also demonstrate the limits of representation and interrogate the concept of a determinate referent.

Two Chopin stories feature female characters who explore transgressive new identities instigated by their sensual interactions with articles of clothing. In "Fedora" clothing transforms the protagonist

profoundly, albeit, in all likelihood, temporarily. First described androgynously as tall, slim, wearing eyeglasses, having a severe expression, and acting somewhat old for her years, Fedora continually feels compelled to interact with her suitor Malther's clothing; she touches his hat repeatedly and and buries her face "for an instant in the rough folds [of his coat] . . . (468).<sup>3</sup> Thus transformed and emboldened, when she picks his sister up at the train station, she places "a long penetrating kiss upon her mouth" (469).

Fedora's ambiguous sexuality, first established by her name, with its connotations of androgyny, feminism, and sexual adventurousness,<sup>4</sup> is emphasized as the story develops. Joyce Dyer reads Fedora's interactions with Malther's clothing as those of a repressed woman who has found a means of sublimating her desire for the man to whom she is attracted; however, Dyer admits in a footnote that there are "suggestions of Fedora's Sapphic tendencies" in the story and quotes from Robert Arner's dissertation, citing the "reticent lesbianism of Fedora" ("The Restive Brute" 138). Christina Bucher, on the other hand, challenges Dyer's reading of the story, substituting a "perverse" one in which she views the story through a lesbian lens. This perspective, she argues, "allows us to read Fedora and the kiss more complexly; it also allows us to see the story as yet another instance of Chopin's expression of the varieties of desire and sexualities in her works" (375). Bucher supports Karen Day's suggestion that "Fedora could be seen as 'signifying a continuum of sexuality and desire, not bound by social constructions'" (Day 116), and argues that the protagonist is androgynous and transgressive, not simply a woman who wants to become a man.

Like Mrs. Sommers in "A Pair of Silk Stockings," whose fondling of silk hosiery ignites a chain reaction of clothing purchases that effect her temporary transformation from frugal mother to sybarite, Fedora, through her physical interaction with Malther's clothing, is similarly sensually awakened and stimulated to violate a gender boundary. Both characters are thus freed to take risks that they otherwise might not have taken and try on new selves that defy the ideal of True Womanhood: to be pious, pure, domestic, and submissive.<sup>5</sup> While Fedora experiments with same-sex physical expression, Mrs. Sommers adopts the persona of a well-to-do lady of leisure, not only by purchasing and wearing silk stockings, boots, and gloves but also by indulging in an expensive magazine, lunch at an upscale restaurant, and a ticket to a matinee performance, a shopping experi-

ence somewhat reflective of Roland Barthes's description of "doing the shopping" in *The Fashion System*: "a pure precious *sensation*, simultaneously tenuous and strong, which combines unlimited buying power, the promise of beauty, the thrill of the city, and the delight of a perfectly idle super-activity" (254, italics mine).

In several of Chopin's stories, dress and fashion are performative in more complex ways. In these stories, Chopin's characters' choices of, attitudes about, and relationships to clothing function actively to subvert social norms in ways that a woman's words could not effect in such a patriarchal environment. Austin categorizes different forms of performative speech acts, and the category most relevant to Chopin's use of fashion is that of perlocutionary acts or perlocution. According to Austin, the nature of perlocutionary speech acts is such that the response sought by the speaker "can be achieved additionally or entirely by non-locutionary means" (117). For instance, one may complete an act of intimidation by swinging a stick rather than by uttering an intimidating phrase. Similarly, characters in Chopin's short fiction complete acts of rebellion by refusing societal fashion codes, opting instead for the unconventional or even the forbidden. Indeed, Austin asserts that a key characteristic of a perlocutionary speech act is the unconventional nature of the act in question.

Especially significant in this respect are several of Chopin's stories in which androgynous protagonists perform liberatory acts by violating sartorial gender boundaries. As Judith Butler explains, "the very notion of 'the person' is called into question by the cultural emergence of those 'incoherent' or 'discontinuous' gendered beings who appear to be persons but who fail to conform to the gendered norms of cultural intelligibility by which persons are defined" (23). In addition to *Fedora*, four other such "discontinuous" gendered beings" are Mamzelle Aurélie of "Regret," Marianne of "The Maid of Saint Phillippe," and the eponymous Juanita and Charlie. All biologically female, these protagonists operate back and forth along the masculine/feminine continuum, performatively constructing gender through dress in ways that disrupt nineteenth-century gendered clothing conventions and, in so doing, challenge conventional notions about male and female identities and social roles. They illustrate Marjorie Garber's argument that ". . . one of the most important aspects of cross-dressing is the way in which it offers a challenge to easy notions of binarity, putting into question the categories of

‘female’ and ‘male,’ whether they are considered essential or constructed, biological or cultural” (10).

Also like *Fedora*, these four protagonists are androgynous in physical appearance. Juanita is 5’10” and weighs more than two hundred pounds. Marianne is also tall; she is described as looking “like a handsome boy” and as “strong” and “supple” (116). Aurélie “possessed a good strong figure” with “ruddy cheeks” and “a determined eye” (375). Chopin’s first description of Charlie as she rides up on a big black horse depicts her as “robust” with a red, overheated face and short hair damp with perspiration (639). Moreover, all of them depart from nineteenth-century standards of female fashion to incorporate elements of masculine attire in their dress. Aurélie wears “a man’s hat . . . and an old blue army overcoat . . . and sometimes top-boots” (375). Juanita always appears in a “soiled calico ‘Mother Hubbard’” and a man’s straw hat (367), and Marianne dresses in buckskin for a day of hunting (116). In “Charlie,” perhaps the most elaborated example of contested gender identity, the protagonist first appears in “‘trouserlets,’ . . . [c]anvas leggings, dusty boots and a single spur . . .” (639). Marianne, Aurélie, and Charlie carry guns rather than more traditionally feminine accessories like parasols and reticules, while *Fedora* wields a whip. Garber points out that such cross-dressing is a third way of doing gender that not only critiques gender binaries but “is a way of describing a space of possibility. Three puts in question the idea of one: of identity, self-sacrificing, self-knowledge” (11). Chopin’s cross-dressing characters thus create for themselves a space of new gender possibility, liberating themselves from the cultural restrictions of nineteenth-century feminine fashions and undermining the concept of identity as unitary and unchanging.

In two of these stories, masculine-appearing women evolve along the gender continuum when they are presented with the maternal duties of caring for and nurturing dependents. Aurélie, left with her neighbor’s children to watch, first “ordered them one and all to bed as she would have shooed the chickens into the hen-house . . .” (376-77). But although she tells her cook that she would rather manage a dozen plantations than four children, she moves further toward the feminine side of the gender continuum through the media of traditionally feminine clothing and accessories: “Ti Nomme’s sticky fingers compelled her to unearth white aprons that she had not worn for years . . . She got down her sewing-basket, which she seldom used . . .” (377). As a behavior modification therapist would argue, chang-

ing actions (and in this case changing dress) also changes feelings. Aurélie's dressing and acting maternally awaken maternal feelings, and when the children's mother comes to collect them, she puts down her head and cries. Although she has learned some feminine skills and developed a more feminine side to her personality, she is still an androgynous figure: "she cried like a man, with sobs that seemed to tear her very soul" (378).

Juanita's maternal feelings are awakened, not by fostering children, but by nurturing a disabled man who needs her care and support. Although masculine in build and dress, she has a mouth with "a fresh and sensuous beauty" (367) and thus attracts a number of male admirers. However, the man she chooses to marry is a poor one-legged man for whom she collects money to buy a cork leg. Juanita appears at the end of the story leading a pony upon which her husband is mounted. The reversal of gender roles in this tableau, as well as that suggested by having the biological female provide a symbolic penis for her biological male companion, reveals a protagonist who operates fluidly along the masculine-feminine gender continuum, freed to do so by her androgynous dress.

In two other stories, Chopin's androgynous protagonists reject traditionally feminine life choices to opt for freedom, aided by their ability to wear both masculine and feminine attire; both Marianne and Charlie demonstrate how gender variance disrupts "the flow of power presumed by patriarchy in relations between men and women" (Halberstam 17). Seventeen-year-old Marianne is the protagonist of one of Chopin's few ventures into historical fiction, "The Maid of Saint Phillippe," set in 1765 in one of the French villages in frontier Illinois that will soon see English rulers as a consequence of the French and Indian War. Marianne appears masculine in build and dress and operates openly in conventionally male spaces; she hunts in the forest and talks politics with the men gathered outside the tavern, expressing her opinion that Louis XV neglects his colonies; moreover, she asserts that when the English come to take their town, she will remain in Saint Phillippe rather than move on to St. Louis with the rest of the villagers. Yet she also participates, through dress, in a feminine identity, as when she returns from a day of hunting to don "a short camlet skirt of sober hue; a green laced bodice whose scantiness was redeemed by a muslin kerchief . . . and the white cap of the French workingwoman" (119) and later demonstrates a con-

ventionally feminine sensibility in prioritizing her relationship with her father and her dedication to his needs.

Just as the villagers of Saint Phillippe are confronted with the possibility of new identities as British subjects as the English march toward their town, Marianne is presented with three new, albeit conventionally feminine, identities: she can follow her friend Jacques Labrie to St. Louis; she can marry Captain Vaudry, who offers her “jewels and silks” (121), the accouterments of a fine lady; or she can stay in Saint Phillippe to care for her elderly father. Despite the fact that she changes out of her buckskin hunting outfit into more womanly attire to meet with Vaudry, she rejects his proposal, telling him to “go away with your velvet and your jewels” (122). She also declines to go with Labrie, rejecting these two would-be suitors and choosing to do her daughterly duty. As Doreen Saar asserts, in this story “Chopin was testing the boundaries of contemporary writing by giving freedom a particularly female meaning” (65) when, after her father’s death, Marianne freely chooses a new place to live and a new identity unaccompanied and undefined by any man. Dressed in the masculine garb that Saar characterizes as “a sign of her personal and emotional freedom” (67), she walks away “[w]ith gun across her shoulder” (123), headed east to join the Cherokee nation, a liminal “space in-between” the raw wilderness and the colonial frontier town that will allow her room to construct a self freely, a self that conforms neither to masculine nor feminine gender norms.

Another androgynous Chopin protagonist who defies gender norms and opts for the freedom to construct her own unique identity is the eponymous Charlie. Anne Blythe reads “Charlie” as “an exceptionally strong and forthright story of the growth into womanhood of a young girl of unusually fine qualities and potential” (208). While accurate, this reading does not account for Charlie’s movement back and forth along the masculine-feminine continuum, as seen in her changes in dress and demeanor throughout the course of the narrative. These changes result in Charlie’s insistence on defining her identity in her own terms, a gender identity that neither wholly rejects nor hews strictly to nineteenth-century notions of True Womanhood.

Seventeen-year-old Charlie, a tomboy riding her horse and her bicycle in trouserlets, with a passion for writing poetry as well as shooting pistols, is seen as androgynous at the beginning of the story. Harbour Winn reflects on Charlie’s literary ancestry, recalling her resemblance to Alcott’s Jo March.<sup>6</sup> However, unlike Jo, Charlie opts

for more conventionally feminine dress and behavior after she accidentally shoots an attractive young man. Sent away to boarding school, she trades her trouserlets for dresses, starts to grow out and curl her hair, learns to dance and draw, whitens her hands and polishes her nails in an attempt to win him. When he proposes to one of her sisters instead, Charlie leaves her feminine accouterments and accomplishments at boarding school, redons her trouserlets, and comes home to help her now-crippled father run his mill.<sup>7</sup>

While not wholly rejecting femininity, as seen when she gives her hometown admirer an implicit commitment to marry in due time, Charlie also takes on the masculine responsibility of managing men in the world of work as well as the more feminine task of caring for her younger sisters. In "Charlie," Chopin offers us not just a coming-of-age story, as Blythe asserts, but one in which the protagonist constructs a new gender identity that is neither wholly masculine nor feminine, rejecting traditional gender norms through her choice of dress and moving fluidly along the masculine-feminine continuum. As Giorcelli points out, through her trouserlets that are "something between bloomers and a divided skirt" (Chopin 639), Charlie creates an "in-between costume" by which she subverts "both gender categories and fixed social roles: she shapes her own identity outside the constraints of the gendered codes imposed by her society" (93).

Chopin's use of performative dress takes on an additional dimension when viewed as an interrogation of the belief that there is "a knowable real world that may be directly mediated through the mirror of words" (Marshall 53). Her satirical story, "Miss Witherwell's Mistake," makes this point through metaphor: the protagonist, a prolific contributor of domestic advice columns and romantic tales to the local newspaper, twice represents language as dress. Reviewing one of her published articles, Miss Witherwell reflects that "[n]ever before had anything from her pen appeared in so slovenly garb" (63). That the article in question is entitled "The Use and Abuse of the Corset" further underscores the significance of this metaphor, as does her later reference to her vocation as her "journalistic habit" (65).

Early in the story, we are shown that Miss Witherwell is well intentioned but naïve and somewhat socially myopic when we learn that she is the author of "a paper for which the matrons of Boredomville were much beholden to the spinster, Miss Witherwell, entitled 'A Word to Mothers.'" (59). This ironic indication of Miss Witherwell's tunnel vision suggests that her conception of language

as the dress of thought is as limited as her self-awareness. The problem with this mimetic theory of language, as well as with Miss Witherwell's literary aesthetic, is exposed as the story unfolds. Miss Witherwell's visiting niece, Mildred, proposes to write a love story, and her aunt counsels a romantic and melodramatic approach. Mildred counters that she will take a more realistic tack, after which Miss Witherwell warns that realism can destroy one's creative abilities, which she terms "fancy."

This little debate about romanticism vs. realism is resolved in favor of the latter when Mildred reveals that her "fictional" story is, in fact, not a romanticized fable produced by her "fancy," but a real-life love story—her own! Moreover, she has put her aunt's advice to have her fictional lovers get married into practice in real life and has wed her own forbidden beau. In hoisting Miss Witherwell on her own petard, Chopin shows us the limitations of her literary aesthetic and, by implication, the flaws in her epistemology. Her notion that words have a one-to-one correspondence to their referents is as simplistic as her bent for romanticism and melodrama, reflective of a naïve concept of language that posits words as external to the ideas that they express and fails to account for the complexities of representation. As Garber contends, elaborating on Butler's argument in *Gender Trouble*, the transvestic demonstrates that gender is not an essence; it exists only in performance (Butler 179; Garber 389). Similarly, the duality between thought and language is only an apparent one, and meaning exists only within the context in which it is expressed through language in a Derridean "endless play of signifiers which can never be finally nailed down to a single centre, essence or meaning" (Eagleton 138).

Barthes asserts that "Fashion presents the woman as a representation" (254). His argument, like that of Joan Riviere in "Womanliness as Masquerade" that femininity, or womanliness "could be assumed and worn as a mask" (306), bolsters Garber's contention that the cross-dresser, whose identity is not established, but rather called into question through attire, shows us the limits of representation through a way of dressing that both conceals and reveals: "When the wig is doffed, ceremonially, at the end of a transvestic stage performance, what is the 'answer' that is disclosed? Only another question: is this the real one? In what sense real? What is the 'truth' of gender and sexuality that we try, in vain, to see through, when what we are gazing at is a hall of mirrors?" (389).

If, as in the above example, meaning is endlessly displaced and deferred through cross-dressing, the cross-dressing protagonists in Chopin's fiction are demonstrating something beyond the permeability and artificiality of conventional gender boundaries. They are also enacting the Saussurean critique of representation and demonstrating the impossibility of a prediscursive reality in which things come before language. They show us that representation is a more complex phenomenon than concepts of language that posit a one-to-one relationship between words and meaning allow, demonstrating, in Garber's words "the subversive power of transvestism both to undermine and to exemplify cultural constructions . . ." (249) and illuminate her contention that "[t]ransvestic theatre . . . is . . . a critique of the possibility of representation itself" (353). Just as there is no gender that exists prior to gendered cultural constructs such as dress and fashion, there is no meaning that exists prior to language. This postmodern epistemological concept of language evoked, as Garber argues, by the cross-dresser, who "questions the limitations of representation" (149), is, in effect, enacted by Chopin's cross-dressing heroines, who challenge not only conventional gender norms, but also conventional notions of referentiality and representation. As Marshall reminds us, echoing Chopin's assertion that "truth rests upon a shifting basis and is apt to be kaleidoscopic" ("Emile Zola's 'Lourdes'" 697), representation is "ideologically suspect: in its reliance on and belief in a central Truth and reality, we need to ask whose truth is presented and whose is excluded" (77).

Kate Chopin was a long-time admirer of the French writer Guy de Maupassant, so much so that she translated several of his stories. Like Chopin, Maupassant was a fiction writer who pushed the envelope of the literary conventions of his day and questioned conventional notions. Chopin wrote admiringly of him in an essay that "[h]ere was a man who had escaped from tradition and authority, who had entered into himself and looked out upon life through his own being and with his own eyes" ("Confidences" 701). Chopin's description of her favorite French author is an equally accurate description of herself. As she looked at her world with her own being, using not only her own eyes, but all of her senses, Chopin dared to imagine what that world might be like if people were freed from gender binaries and fixed identities to express the fullness of their humanity. In Chopin's fictional imaginings discussed in this essay, dress functions performatively to enable her protagonists to reject the

conventions of feminine identity and construct their own unique selves, neither wholly masculine nor feminine, as they, in turn, function metafictionally to interrogate simplistic notions of representation and referentiality.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Karen Day, citing Judith Butler's contention that separation from the Other is an essential condition of identity construction, contends that in "The Story of an Hour," "Louise's self-identity depends on her separation (through death) from her husband" (113). We argue in this essay that sense experience, mediated through clothing, is an equally significant component of identity formation. See Mary Papke, "Chopin's Stories of Awakening," *Approaches to Teaching Chopin's The Awakening*, ed. Bernard Koloski (NY: Modern Language Association, 1988): 73-9 and Cristina Giorcelli, "Edna's Wisdom: A Transitional and Numinous Merging," *New Essays on The Awakening*, ed. Wendy Martin (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1988): 109-48 for illuminating discussions of the role of sense experience in the three works mentioned in this paragraph.

<sup>2</sup>See Thorstein Veblen, "Dress as an Expression of the Pecuniary Culture," *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. 1899. NY: Penguin, 1979: 167-87. Here Veblen discusses women's dress as signs of conspicuous waste and conspicuous leisure.

<sup>3</sup>This and all other quotations taken from the works of Kate Chopin are from *The Complete Works of Kate Copin*, ed. Per Seyersted. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1969).

<sup>4</sup>The American fedora, and its British cousin, the trilby, are felt hats with dented crowns, brims turned up at the back and down at the front, and a crease down the middle. During the nineteenth century, fedoras, as well as bowlers, boaters, and other styles of men's hats, became important social markers, denoting such things as class, status, group membership, political affiliation, and cultural orientation. Chopin chose the fedora, a "soft yet firm" men's hat dating from the mid-nineteenth century, for her title character's name, probably aware that this type of hat was commonly worn by artists and free thinkers "who wanted to make a stand against the old conservative values of the previous century" (*Encyclopedia of Clothing and Fashion* 180). Chopin may also have been thinking of Victorien Sardou's 1889 New York production of *Fedora* in New York, starring Sarah Bernhardt, who wore a fedora during the play. Hatbox.com states that the fedora originated as a woman's hat, citing Sardou's play as the original of this hat style, and Robert Rath, in "The History and Abuse of the Fedora," (March 6, 2014), says that "[s]ex symbol Sarah Bernhardt sported the hat in her title role, and on its debut the fedora became the new 'in' fashion among young women," adding that "from the start the fedora represented assertiveness and more than a hint of masculinity." Because of this link established between the fedora and an actress who was known as a liberated woman, the fedora was adopted as a symbol by the women's rights movement. ([www.escapistmagazine.com](http://www.escapistmagazine.com))

<sup>5</sup>For an extensive discussion of the Cult of True Womanhood see Nancy F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: Woman's Sphere in New England, 1780-1835* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1977) and Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860" (*American Quarterly* 18.2 Part 1 [Summer 1966]: 151-174).

<sup>6</sup>Another apt comparison can be made between Chopin's "Charlie" and Willa Cather's "Tommy the Unsentimental" (1896), which features another eponymous heroine with a male nickname who helps run her father's business. Theodosia, aka Tommy, plays whist and billiards with men, makes cocktails for them, and rides a bicycle; like Charlie, she constructs an identity neither wholly masculine nor feminine.

<sup>7</sup>Irving Berlin notwithstanding, apparently you *can* get a man with a gun—but you may not be able to hold him!

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“UNIFORMED FOR WORK”: CLOTHES AND  
WARTIME SACRIFICE IN EDNA FERBER’S LAST  
EMMA MCCHESNEY STORY

SCOTT D. EMMERT

Before she was an international celebrity, author of best-selling novels that later became Broadway spectacles and big-screen epics, Edna Ferber wrote a series of popular short stories about a female traveling “salesman.” In these stories, Emma McChesney travels the Midwest, carting samples of women’s garments made by the T. A. Buck Featherloom Petticoat Company. She rides cramped trains to small cities such as Oshkosh, Wisconsin, and Terre Haute, Indiana, where she promotes her company’s latest line of clothes to buyers at local department stores. She stays in middling hotels and eats in their suspect dining rooms—prudently choosing “roast beef, medium” as the safest item on the menu. She out-works and outsmarts male competitors, develops a network of female professionals that provides moral support, and raises her son Jock from idle teenager to influential advertising executive. In the later stories she marries T. A. Buck, Jr., son of the founder, and shrewdly helps to manage the company. The McChesney stories were published in the *American Magazine* and *Cosmopolitan* between 1911 and 1915, and they were collected in three volumes that came out—one a year—beginning in 1913. The series was so popular that *The Saturday Evening Post* offered Ferber \$1,000 per story to continue it (Ferber, *Peculiar Treasure* 173). In her memoir, *Peculiar Treasure* (1939), Ferber explains that she turned down this opportunity because she feared creative stagnation (174). If she is to be believed, Edna Ferber had to stop writing about Emma McChesney so she could go on to produce the block-buster novels such as *So Big* (1924) and *Show Boat* (1926) that would complete her ascent to literary stardom.

Still, in 1918, three years after Ferber took leave of the series, the Great War called Emma McChesney back into service. In that year, Ferber published “One Hundred Percent” in the October issue of *New Metropolitan* magazine. The story finds Emma actively engaged in war-related work. In addition to continuing as an executive with the garment factory, she dons a uniform to work for an unnamed social service organization in, apparently, war relief and fundraising. More important, however, is Emma’s ultimate decision to return permanently to business attire and go back on the road as a “travelling man” in the Midwest, taking care of the Featherloom Company so T. A., Jock, and Charley Fisk—an employee with the company—can put on uniforms and do their part for the war. The story celebrates patriotism to reassure Americans in the midst of a bloody war that their self-sacrifice is noble.<sup>1</sup> “One Hundred Percent” is, therefore, propaganda. At the same time, the story suggests that it is entirely fitting for women to work outside the home. All along, Ferber’s McChesney stories sought to make readers comfortable with the prospect of working women; “One Hundred Percent” furthers this goal by championing women’s contributions to the war effort and the home-front economy. In this last McChesney story, Ferber again supports a proper, wider freedom for women beyond domestic labor by relying on a subject commonly associated with women: clothing and fashion.

Women in uniform were a common sight during the First World War, and readers of “One Hundred Percent” would not have been surprised to see Emma “uniformed for work” (13). Historian Lettie Gavin details the service of female nurses in the military, noting that by the end of the war, 21,480 women served in the Army Nurse Corps (44), with thousands more on active duty in other branches of the military. Less well known, however, is the active-duty service of women in the military beyond the nursing profession. For example, some 11,000 women served in the United States Navy (Gavin 2). Working as clerks, these “yeomanettes”<sup>2</sup> were eventually issued “dark blue tailored uniforms” to mark their official status equal to their male counterparts; as Gavin notes: “The insignia of the female yeoman, two crossed quills, was the same as that of the enlisted male yeoman of the regular Navy, and the badge was worn on the sleeve of the uniform blouse” (4).<sup>3</sup> In addition to these active-service military personnel, large numbers of American women put on uniforms to work, both in the United States and overseas, for social service organiza-

tions such as the Red Cross, the Salvation Army, and the Y.W.C.A. (Gavin xi).

Moreover, along with these actual women in service, Americans would have seen numerous recruitment posters that featured females in uniform, such as the one for the Motor Corps of America that encouraged women to enlist as truck drivers. In her analysis of this and other posters, scholar Pearl James discovers a complex message that at once reinforces traditional notions of femininity and validates the many new roles for women as active participants in the war: "Posters redefined the ways femininity could be imagined and was experienced [and] many American women took posters as evidence that their contributions to the war effort were essential and used posters to advertise and justify their war work" ("Images" 275). The character of Emma McChesney in "One Hundred Percent" performs a similar function: her wartime sacrifice confirms the traditional role of wife and mother while endorsing the emerging phenomenon of women with jobs outside the home.

The value of the service Emma provides is first shown when she helps other women into uniforms that fit them nicely. Emma is a self-fashioner with a keen eye for fashion. The T. A. Buck Featherloom Petticoat Company responds to the war by producing new clothing lines: "By mid-summer<sup>4</sup> the workrooms were turning out not only the accustomed grist of petticoats, but strange garments, such as gray and khaki flannel shirts, flannelette one-piece pajamas, and woolen bloomers, all intended for the needs of women war workers going abroad" (12). In addition to the one-piece pajamas that kept women warm in the "heatless villages of France and Flanders," Emma is the innovator behind "the tailored, neck-fitting collar" (12). This collar, "a seemingly trivial item," is presented as necessary to the morale of female war workers. Early in the story we hear from Kate Nevins, who directs the department store with the "official sanction of the government" to sell women's uniforms. Miss Nevins "had [recently] been obliged to listen to scores of canteeners, nurses, secretaries and motor leaguers who, standing before a long mirror in one of the many fitting-rooms, had gazed, frowned, fumbled at collar and topmost button and said, 'But it looks so—so lumpy around the neck'" (12). When the soon-to-ship-out war workers wish for a "'turn-down collar instead,'" Miss Nevins must regretfully inform them that the button-up collar is "regulation." Emma's newly designed collar comes to the rescue, receiving praise from Miss Nevins, who calls Emma a

“genius”: “All these women warriors are willing to bleed and die for their country, but they want to do it in a collar that fits, and I don’t blame them,” says Miss Nevins (12).

As scholar Celia Malone Kingsbury discerns, here Emma serves tradition by fashioning apparel that allows women war workers to maintain feminine allure. Kingsbury connects Emma’s efforts in this regard to poster illustrations by Howard Chandler Christy which portrayed uniformed women as sexually appealing (90). However, as James demonstrates, these “Christy girls” (such as the one portrayed in the Motor Corps of America poster mentioned earlier)<sup>5</sup> cannot be dismissed as sexist stereotypes. While careful not to draw women as “mannish, unattractive, or asexual,” Chandler nonetheless created images of active females for a number of posters that “informed viewers about the challenging jobs women could take on” (James, “Images” 305, 304). Kingsbury is correct to note that Emma, like the “girls” Christy created, serves war propaganda, but the astute analysis by James of the contradictions in these posters—that women appear both as objects of passive gaze and as active participants in vital war efforts—applies as well to Ferber’s portrayal of Emma in “One Hundred Percent.”

Indeed, the three illustrations that accompany the story all show Emma dressed smartly in a military-style uniform similar to ones featured in recruitment posters. In each illustration, including one in which she stands as if at attention, Emma wears a jacket complete with insignia of rank, a soft-sided hat very much like the recently developed overseas cap, and a Sam Browne belt. This last detail is especially significant since Sam Browne belts were supposed to be worn only on overseas duty (James, *New Death* 58). That illustrator Arthur William Brown depicts Emma in such a belt may indicate his ignorance of this fact, though recruitment posters often displayed women in Sam Brownes. Illustrator Brown may very well have taken his cue from these posters, given the overtly patriotic theme of “One Hundred Percent.” Nevertheless, the illustrations of Emma’s uniform convey the impression of a woman decidedly on active service, an impression that is underscored by the nearby male figures shown in civilian clothes.

The most important duty she can perform dawns slowly on Emma, however. In her own home, Emma is not quick to notice a problem, one that only she can ingeniously solve. Her husband, T. A. Buck, is unhappy. He is envious that Emma is actively engaged in



Figure 1: "I'm more resigned to war this minute, Mrs. Buck, than I've been since it began." Illustration from "One Hundred Percent" by Edna Ferber, *New Metropolitan* 48.5 (October 1918): 12.

war work, that she wears a uniform when he wishes he could as well. But running his company prevents him from pursuing a war-related role. Much of the drama of the story consists of Emma missing the clues of her husband's desire to serve. One day on the street, for example, Emma spies T. A. and catches up with him. He asks her to come home to dine. "'Can't do it,' Emma declines. 'I'm on my way to the Ritz to meet a dashing delegation from Serbia. You never saw such gorgeous creatures. All gold and green and red, with swords, and snake-work and glittering boots. They make a musical-comedy solidier look like an undertaker'" (13). Emma then fails to notice the "queer little look" that flashes in T. A.'s eyes. Later, she misses T. A.'s dissatisfaction with his current situation as the two of them watch a parade on Fifth Avenue:

Flags of every nation, save one. Uniforms of every blue from French to navy; of almost any shade save field green. Pongee-colored Englishmen, seeming seven feet high, to a man; aviators slim and elegant, with walking sticks made of the propeller of their shattered planes, with a notch for every Hun plane bagged. Slim girls, exotic as the orchids they wore, gazing limpid-eyed at the warrior *élégants*. Women uniformed to the last degree of tailored exquisiteness. Girls, war accoutered, who brought arms up in sharp salute as they passed Emma. (58)

The whole parade is dressed—and dressed well—for war service. But T. A. remains stuck in his business suit. When Emma enthuses over a “beautiful . . . Canadian officer,” T. A. responds by “cut[ting] a vicious little semi-circle in the air with his walking stick” (58), a walking stick not made from an airplane propeller.

Eventually, Emma notices and places the source of T. A.’s unhappiness. She also becomes aware that Jock and Charley Fisk would like to enlist. She reacts in her typical fashion: she fixes everyone’s problem. Jock’s wife, Grace, and Charley’s wife, Gertie, are both ex-office workers, and Emma brings them back on staff for the Buck Featherloom Petticoat Company. Then she decides to go back on the road as a travelling saleswoman. The men can go to war; the women will run the business. Both outcomes are presented as wholly pragmatic and proper. And both are presented as sartorially correct. T. A. says to Emma, close before her departure: “‘You’ll be working without a salary—working like a man—like three men.’” To which Emma responds: “‘Working for three men, T. A. Three fighting men. I’ve got two service buttons already’ she glanced down at her blouse ‘and Charley Fisk said I had the right to wear one for him. I’ll look like a mosaic, but I’m going to put ’em all on’” (59).

By changing out of her uniform—in which she appears “like a shrimp compared to Charley” (59)—Emma does not relinquish her importance in the war effort. As she packs “practical blue serge garments” for her return to the Midwest, T. A. “trie[s] hard to keep his gaze from the contemplation of his khaki-clad self reflected in the long mirror” (59). Emma and T.A. are now, the story suggests, properly attired for their roles. Yet Emma has not lost her freedom or suffered a deficit in her self-esteem. In many of the Emma McChesney stories, Edna Ferber uses women’s clothing—designing it, selling it, wearing it—to reinforce the image of women as capable workers outside the home. In a uniform complete with Sam Browne belt or in a

business dress of sensible material, Emma—and the increasing number of women like her—is free to push against the seams of established gender roles.

Fashion history tells us that the onset of the First World War rendered the hobble skirt—a restrictive, tight-fitting garment—unsuitable for the new world at war in which women were to participate actively. These narrow skirts were replaced by “dresses with wide even voluminous skirts coming to a few inches above the ankle” (Ewing 81). Slowly going out of style before the war, the constrictive hobble skirt<sup>6</sup> “quickly disappeared” once the fighting started (Ewing 81). Clothes changed so women could help win the war. Moreover, this change signaled potential progress in women’s rights. As scholar Lori Harrison-Kahan recently reminds us, early feminists such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman saw a direct correlation between restrictive female clothing and proscribed gender roles (206-207). During the First World War, freer fashions symbolized greater autonomy for women.

Here, however, Edna Ferber and Emma McChesney are fashionably out front, having represented a pre-war culture of female emancipation that the war accelerates. In the story “Hoops, My Dear”—republished in the 1915 collection *Emma McChesney & Company*—Emma designs a full-form skirt to compete with the hobbling “‘Fromkin Form-Fit Skirt’” (176). In Emma’s “‘T. A. Buck Balloon-Petticoat’” (177) women can move naturally, freely (168). The clothes don’t make the woman, in this case; they let her make herself.

Ferber biographer Julie Goldsmith Gilbert views Emma McChesney as “a breakthrough for women” (408). That breakthrough is emphasized in her last fictional appearance when readers see Emma sacrificing for the war without sacrificing—in her clothes and in her sense of self—complete freedom of movement.

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### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>When “One Hundred Percent” was published in October of 1918, American soldiers were engaged in the Meuse-Argonne offensive that began on September 26 and would last until the end of the war on November 11. More than one million American soldiers contributed to this offensive, incurring casualties of 26,277 killed and 95,786 wounded (Coffman 299).

<sup>2</sup>Gavin writes that Secretary of the Navy Josephus Daniels disliked this designation, and within the Navy both females and males were called yeoman, though “a parenthetical ‘F’ for

‘female’ was added to distinguish them from their male counterparts when sea duty was assigned” (4).

<sup>3</sup>Historians Jean Ebbert and Marie-Beth Hall detail the development of this uniform, which most women in the Navy appreciated and “wore . . . proudly” (35). See chapter three of *The First, the Few, the Forgotten: Navy and Marine Corps Women in World War I*.

<sup>4</sup>Of 1917, presumably, after the United States entered the war in April.

<sup>5</sup>This poster may be seen in James’s “Images of Femininity in World War I Posters” page 305 and online at Yale University’s archive of First World War material.

<sup>6</sup>Fashion historian Daniel Delis Hill notes that the hobble skirt, though popular in France and England, was initially resisted in America; it gained popularity among American women after 1910 (*As Seen* 27-28; *Advertising* 135-136).

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W.R. BURNETT'S "DRESSING UP," OR,  
"AIN'T I BOUL' MICH'?"

GUY SZUBERLA

Nearing the end of a long and prolific writing career, in the year before his death in 1982, W.R. Burnett confided to an interviewer that "[m]y trouble, you see, is that I'm basically a comic writer. It's something I've always had to restrain. I see the world through a funny angle."<sup>1</sup>

He was summing up a persistent comic quality found in his best screenplays and fiction, a skewed and "funny" perspective that he inserted into gangster films like *Scarface* (1932) and *This Gun for Hire* (1942), and slipped into World War II genre pieces like *The Great Escape* (1963). That same slant vision, with flashes of restrained humor, penetrates the darkness of the underworld in novels like his *Little Caesar* (1929), *High Sierra* (1940), and *The Asphalt Jungle* (1949). Beneath the whirling machinery of his plots, behind his characters' tough talk and their periodic eruptions into violent action, Burnett created and revealed a "world" that was oddly "funny" and yet spectacularly dark and brutal.

That perspective on the world was fully on display in "Dressing Up," Burnett's short story about Chicago crime and fashion. The story appeared in *Harper's Monthly* in November of 1929, four or five months after the publication of his best-selling gangster novel, *Little Caesar*. Like *Little Caesar*, it was set in Prohibition-era Chicago; drew its principal characters from the city's underworld; carefully alluded to "the Big Boy," Al Capone; and fit its action to the violence of the city's notorious and ongoing "beer wars." Through much of "Dressing Up," Burnett traces fashion's ritual two-step dance of imitation and individualization. But since this story is set in the Chicago of the 1920s, Burnett also conflates the conven-

tions of hard-boiled crime fiction with the softer language of fashion notes, clothing ads, and the alluring imagery of mass marketing. The result, I will argue, is a calculated and comic set of incongruities.

How could Burnett's imaginative entry into the fashion world of 1920s Chicago be anything else? He was looking at the promise and illusions of men's fashion through the eyes of hard-boiled gangsters.<sup>2</sup> For the most part, we follow the principal character, Blue—an improbably named Chicago gangster and mob hit man—as he spends lavishly, shopping for clothes in downtown Chicago. The tough and muscle-bound Blue, after “dressing up,” thinks himself to be modern and fashionable, and perhaps he is. With his new clothes, he feels he has put on a mask of urbanity; he becomes intense, restless, and euphoric. His emotional or psychological state changes with the change of clothing, resembling what the sociologist Georg Simmel once called “metropolitan individuality” (31). In Blue's words and taunting boast: “Ain't I Boul' Mich'?”

“Boul' Mich',” in the 1920s, was the name Chicagoans gave to Michigan Avenue. And it was also the name that “smart” Chicagoans gave to the high fashion and the life of luxury the avenue represented. If period advertising copy is believed, and the renderings of city planners and magazine illustrators are credited, in the 1920s, Chicago's Michigan Avenue, or Boul' Mich,' rivaled the style and the urbane pleasures of its namesake, Paris's Boulevard Saint-Michel. After the “Links Bridge” carrying Michigan Avenue over the Chicago River was opened in 1920, North Michigan soon became a setting for the city's lavish nightlife and a stage for its most conspicuous displays of consumerism.<sup>3</sup> The Drake Hotel, the Allerton Hotel, the Wrigley Building, and the Tribune Tower were all built or completed in the twenties and took their place as Michigan Avenue landmarks. Boul' Mich' became the city's “Magnificent Mile” of shops, department stores, art galleries, cafes, fine restaurants, grand hotels, and elegant nightclubs. *The Chicagoan*, a magazine that ran from 1926 to 1935, had its talented artists imaginatively picture Michigan Avenue on its covers, often in startling and beautiful art deco designs and colors. Its illustrators and photographers gave iconic form to Boul' Mich.' The magazine's fashion writers, in commanding detail, prescribed how “the Chicagoman dresses for the Boulevard” (*The Chicagoan* 31 December 1927: 31). Theirs was a glamorous, exotic, and mostly imaginary boulevard. Typical of the images projecting this reimagined place are William Cotant's cover illustration, “Nightscape” (24

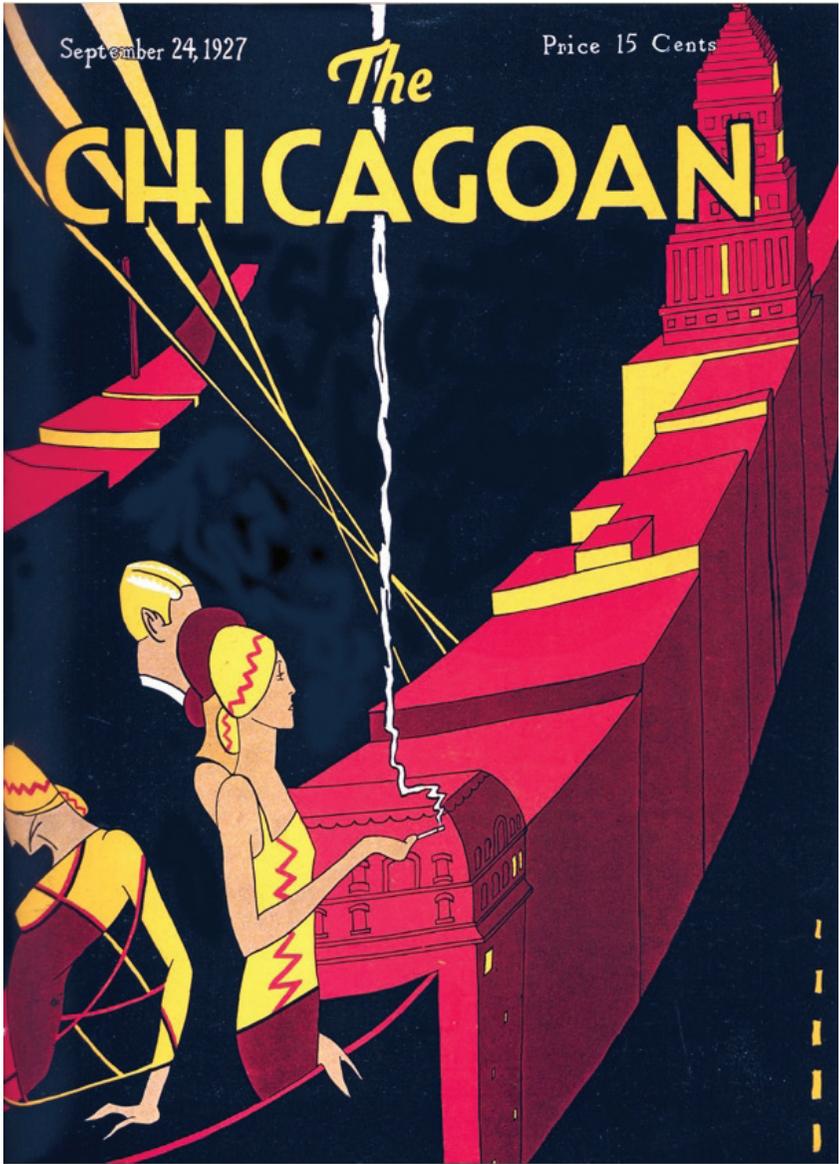


Figure 1: William Cotant, "Nightscape," *The Chicagoan* 24 Sept. 1927, cover. Reprinted by permission of Quigley Publishing Company, a division of QP Media, Inc.

September 1927) and Mervin A. Gunderson's cover, "Boul' Mich'" (10 March 1928). Here Chicagoans could see their city filled with well-dressed and beautiful people (figures 1 and 2). Top-hatted men, boulevardiers with walking sticks, men of fashion and beautifully dressed women in cocktail dresses or furs and pearls—these were the sophisticated and smart Chicagoans on Boul' Mich,' men and women "whose thoughts . . . march to the cadence of [the city's] boulevards" (*The Chicagoan* 31 December 1927).<sup>4</sup> Burnett's gangsters expected to join this march of the elegant and sophisticated.

Sometime during the 1920s, Chicago journalists had started using the same catch phrases—weighted words like "well-dressed man" and "smart dresser"—for local gangsters and smart Chicagoans. Writers were transferring, usually with exaggeration and studied irony, ready-made clichés from the world of fashion to crime reporting. When a writer for *The Chicagoan* titled a 1926 piece "Our Well Dressed Contemporaries," few readers should have been surprised to learn that the title referred to local gangsters and gang leaders whose "clothes were cut from expensive bolts" and finished by "a good tailor" (14 June 1926: 13). In an article for the *The Saturday Evening Post*, the Chicago novelist Samuel Merwin complained that now his city's "big beer barons . . . lived and dressed like lords," and had become "men about town" (26 October 1929: 8-9). The long-time Chicago journalist, Walter Noble Burns, warned in *One-Way Ride* (1931) that underworld figures no longer skulked "in back-street hideouts" or huddled in crowded slum tenements. They had taken on the "appearance of dandies gathered for wafers and tea at some function of splash society" (39). Yet another Chicago newsman, Fred Pasley, warned his readers in *Al Capone: The Biography of a Self-Made Man* (1930) not to think of the city's typical gangster as "a furtive, sallow faced creature, with cap and pulled-down visor and cigarette drooping from his mouth." That was an outdated and "popular fancy" (165-66). Criminals now more closely resembled the boulevardiers and well-dressed men in formal clothes on the covers and pages of *The Chicagoan*.

In short, expensive clothing and the fashionable cut of a suit no longer offered reliable class markers. The Chicago gangster was busily transforming himself into a man of fashion and a man-about-town. Imagined or not, these changes were disturbing to many. David E. Ruth, in *Inventing the Public Enemy: The Gangster in American Culture*, points out that the 1920s "stylish uniformity" in

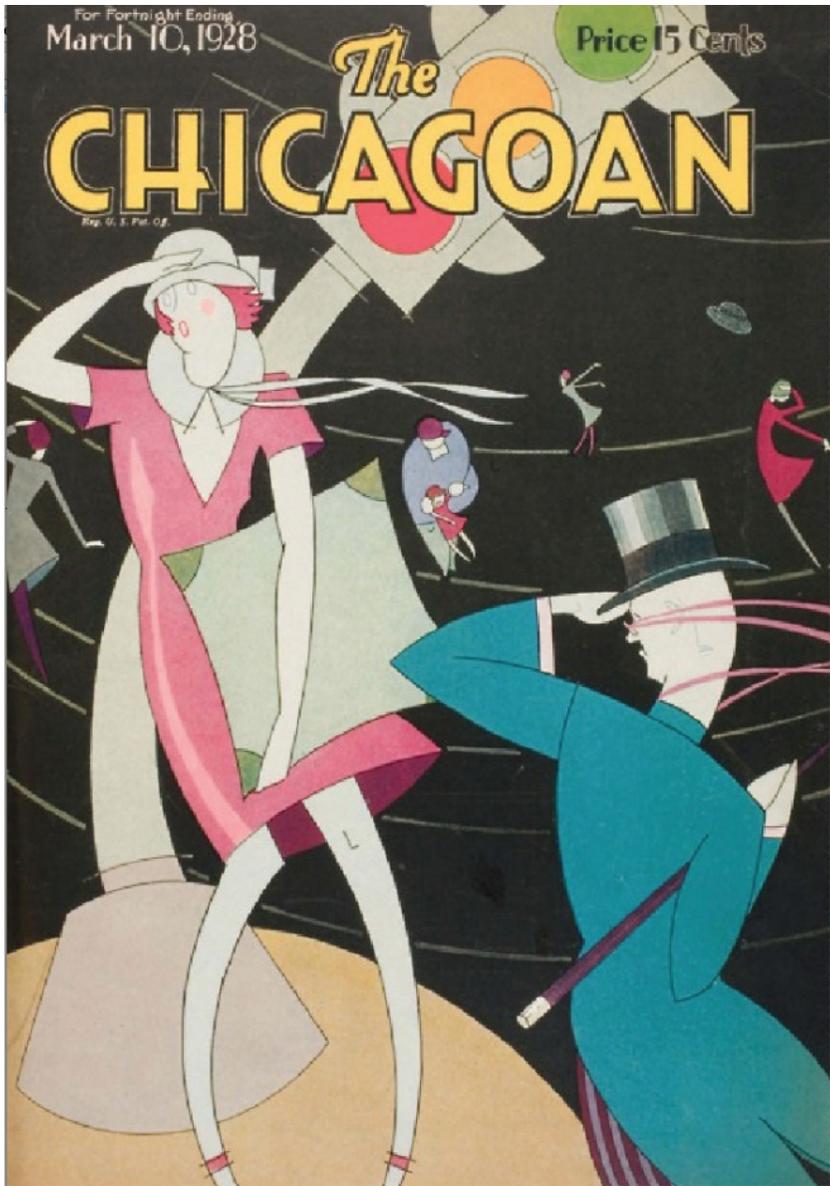


Figure 2: Mervin A. Gunderson, "Boul' Mich," *The Chicagoan* 10 Mar. 1928, cover. Reprinted by permission of Quigley Publishing Company, a division of QP Media, Inc.

men's clothing—and the presence of the well-dressed gangster in respectable night clubs, restaurants, and theaters—illuminate the social order" (74).

Burnett burlesqued Chicago's stylish gangsters in the fiction and screenplays he wrote between 1929 and 1932. But, because he also seemed to caricature the fashions of the respectable, little that he wrote could have long comforted the city's "best people" or given them a sense of security.<sup>5</sup> His short story, "Dressing Up," satirizes the well-dressed and free-spending gangster, and, with artful ambiguity, illuminates the social significance and the comedy of 1920s stylish uniformity.

### I.

The plot of "Dressing Up" is simple and predictable. Blue spends the payoff from a contract killing on a shopping spree in downtown Chicago. He has, before the opening of the story's action, bought an expensive fur for his moll, Birdy, who now helps him pick out his clothes. At a men's clothing store, he buys himself two suits, a dozen lavender shirts, lavender silk underwear, handmade cravats, a brace of hats, three pairs of shoes, and an outlay of other clothes and accessories costing him a small fortune. When, a little later, he meets his friends outside a café, he brags clownishly about his ascent to high style: "'Look at me, Guido. Ain't I Boul' Mich'? I got silk underwear under this suit'" (675). In the final scene, in an almost inevitable plot turn, he is gunned down and killed by a rival gang, wearing his newly purchased and fashionable clothes.

Much of "Dressing Up" enacts some of the simple and ordinary pleasures of consumerism: choosing, buying, wearing, and flaunting high-price clothes. The first half of the story bends toward the comic. Alluding to children's games and the play-acting involved in "dressing up," Burnett's title hints from the start at the narrative of self-conscious pretense and the delusions that will follow. Trying on his new clothes, looking at himself in the store's triple mirror, Blue "puffed out his chest, struck attitudes, and studied his profile," which until then he'd only seen in mug shots or Bertillon photos. The store manager, in snide asides and ironically polite remarks, comments on this posturing. He subtly parries Blue's braggadocio, flatters his taste and style, and silently "computes" the windfall profits. The second half of the story—the night and morning after Blue has dressed himself up—moves toward black humor. Though his friends Guido and Bud

have warned him that he is a marked man, that he will be killed and have a “swell funeral” if he does not get of Chicago, Blue stubbornly stays on so that he might ride the Twentieth Century to New York (675). He has become obsessed with the idea of sporting his new suit and tie while riding this train; he dreams of “riding the Century dressed up like John Barrymore” (677). Feeling that he is now a “big shot,” he expects to take his place on board the Twentieth Century with Chicago’s and New York’s most exclusive and sophisticated society.

The *bella figura* that Blue cuts in his new clothes, or vainly hopes to fill, illustrates the style of the “boulevardier,” that urbane and masculine ideal promised by period clothing advertisements, style books, and store windows. During the 1920s, the ideal was stamped out in the advertising pages of glossy magazines like *The Saturday Evening Post* and *The Chicagoan* and illuminated by tabloid news photos and the flickering images of silent movies. Ruth argues that the gangster’s “sartorial displays,” particularly in Hollywood films of the 1930s, made him into “an oversized projection of the urban American seduced by the promises of consumerism.” The movie gangster was the “glamorous consumer” who could buy and wear every man’s idea of fine clothes (66-9). In “Dressed to Kill,” a chapter of his book on the gangster in American culture, Ruth contends that the gangster’s tastes and desires—shown in his public displays of clothing, expensive cars, and luxuriously furnished apartments—were not readily distinguishable from those of solid, respectable citizens.

What Blue saw in the store’s triple mirrors was what many men in 1928 and 1929 saw, or thought they saw, when they looked at themselves in new clothes. They trained a male gaze on the reflection of a masculine and urbane ideal, an ideal seen in magazine illustrations and in men’s clothing advertisements in the daily papers. In a mirror-gazing scene in *Little Caesar*, close to the one in “Dressing Up,” Burnett dramatizes such an encounter and investment of meaning. We watch as Rico, the mob boss and “Little Caesar” of the novel’s title, is “dazzled” by his own reflected image in “a full length” mirror. Though he wears a borrowed, ill-fitting, and flashy tuxedo, he thinks that he “looked like one of them rich clubmen he read about in magazines” (207).

Call such a transformation an example of “*la démocratisation du luxe*,” or sing about it as “puttin’ on the Ritz,” or define it as a “meaning transfer” from goods to an individual, what Burnett dramatizes

here and again in "Dressing Up" are the ways in which luxury goods—the once unique and original products made for the few—have become commodities (Bowlby 2; McCracken 77). Mass manufacturing, mass marketing and distribution, and a certain standardization of taste (Ruth's "stylish uniformity") made fashionable men's clothing affordable and accessible to almost all in the 1920s. In 1927 and 1928, the Chicago clothing manufacturer Kuppenheimer offered "Good Clothes for Every Man" in its *Book of Styles* (1928) and bannered the slogan in its advertising. Hart Schaffner & Marx, another Chicago manufacturer of ready-to-wear men's clothing, promoted much the same idea in its magazine and newspaper advertisements. Hart Schaffner once promised its customers that their clothes had the same "swagger" and up-to-minute styling that was to be found in the work of the finest London tailors. To underline this argument, Hart Schaffner's copywriters challenged readers to compare their line of clothes with those recently seen in a "picture of the Prince of Wales." The illustration heading this copy presented two handsomely dressed Americans walking in London. Their Hart Schaffner & Marx outfits—a raglan sleeve topcoat and "a two button sack" suit—give them a princely air and an urbane poise, as they mingle with palace guards and a royal parade (*Post* 5 March 1927: 2).

Blue brags that with his "coat on" he looks "like the Prince of Wales. Boul' Mich,' kid; that's us, Boul' Mich' . . ." (676). He conflates and confuses two different styles: the custom-made and bespoke finery of Edward, Prince of Wales and the commodified clothing of Chicago boulevardiers worn on Michigan Avenue. That the brutish Blue would, if he could, enter this atmospheric world of fine fashion and aristocratic society, that he can imagine himself as a well-dressed man in a Kuppenheimer or Hart Schaffner ad, seems at once comic, fantastic, and fairly ordinary. He is described as "short and stocky" (673). Even after dressing up in his expensive new clothes, he can bear little resemblance to the elegant and elongated models in clothing ads or the svelte Prince Edward. Yet his belief in his transformation—that clothes make the man—is understandable; his pretenses and confusion differ little from the standardized expectations daily bred by consumer culture.

Blue also imagines himself "dressed up like John Barrymore," the silent film star and actor (677). He appears to identify with the then well-known figure and image of the actor Barrymore, with, that is, the Barrymore that J.C. Leyendecker (1874-1951) painted for

Kuppenheimer. For a full-page ad in *The Saturday Evening Post*, Barrymore modeled a Kuppenheimer Sack Suit, and, in a flanking and mirrored pose, he dressed in the ragged but picturesque costume of the medieval poet Francois Villon (26 March 1927: 95). Barrymore had just played Villon in the silent film, “The Beloved Rogue,” and, of course, he was promoting its opening here. The text of the *Post* ad, purporting to record Barrymore’s endorsement of Kuppenheimer clothes, reads in part:

We asked Mr. Barrymore to give us his ideas for a smart town and business suit for Spring. He said: ‘If I wished to be in town . . . where I thought I might possibly be seen, I would like to look *well dressed*, but not *dressed up*. Conspicuously inconspicuous.’ And so, to these Barrymore ideas of good appearance, we created the Famous Fifties group of Sack Suits: single and double-breasted models for 1927 . . . suave, urbane . . . as finished in every detail as Barrymore’s art itself. (95)

Burnett may be rewriting these conventional style tips about looking “dressed up,” since his title and his story, like the clichés Barrymore recites, add up to a cautionary tale warning against being “conspicuous” and “dressed up” in public. Blue will be gunned down on the streets of Chicago precisely because dressing up in his new clothes and strutting down city streets make him into a conspicuous target.

The Barrymore ad supplied Burnett with a richly layered intertext. In the twenties, Leyendecker created and recreated the Kuppenheimer man in hundreds, if not several thousand, ads and store posters. Years before Burnett wrote “Dressing Up,” Leyendecker had made his models into the familiar face of the “suave, urbane” male and an icon of masculine form. He did occasional commercial work for Hart Schaffner, invented the famous Arrow shirt man, and painted elegant ads for Interwoven Socks. For Pierce Arrow and other high-priced automakers, he pictured men in tails and women in evening gowns stepping into chauffeured limousines. (He is also credited with having painted 322 covers for *The Saturday Evening Post*, as many as Norman Rockwell.)<sup>6</sup> The Kuppenheimer man, the masculine idol that Leyendecker drew and painted for close to twenty years, was square-jawed and muscular, perfectly groomed, self-possessed, and at ease in high society and the locker room. In the imagined world of these advertisements, that is, he could grace college football games, swim meets, fox hunts, polo matches, cocktail parties, gatherings on yachts, and formal dances with equal and unflinching measures of *savoir faire*. Leyendecker painted the Kuppenheimer man in elegant suits, glis-

tening evening clothes, and ruggedly tweedy overcoats—all in seductive, brightly highlighted colors.

There's a familiar paradox of consumer culture lurking in Leyendecker's commercial work and Blue's projections. To look distinctive and well dressed—to be "suave" and "urbane"—means buying the style that has been mass manufactured, mass marketed, and close to universally accepted. Wear what other men in the city are wearing to look stylish and individual. As lines in another section of this Kuppenheimer-Barrymore ad have it: "every man should want" to buy and wear their "individualized sack suits, sport suits, and topcoats" (95). When Blue puts on his new clothes, when he is too drunk and "too excited to sleep," he can believe that he has been transformed into that distinctive and "individualized" everyman posed so beautifully in the clothing advertisements (677). In his words, he looks "Boul' Mich."

## II.

"Boul' Mich'" was a localism that had a currency in Chicago during the 1920s. The typical *Harper's Monthly* reader, reading "Dressing Up" in November of 1929, may have found this piece of Chicago slang opaque and been puzzled as well by "Boul' Mich' Blue" repeatedly defining himself with this epithet. On the other hand, most readers in the twenties were well positioned to understand Burnett's satiric strategy. Ridiculing the gangster's extravagant spending on clothes and his bad taste, as reporters, society columnists, and fashion writers often did, could assure the established and upper classes that "definition, ranking, and exclusion" might prevail (Ruth 75). Burlaquing a character like Blue, however ambiguously, spoke to those who felt they belonged to an aristocracy of taste and refinement.

For the same reason, "Puttin' on the Ritz" and "puttin' on a front" had become well-worn clichés in the twenties, if not quite fully formed and respectable literary tropes. In Burnett's *Little Caesar*, the mob chief Sam Vettori boasts that he controls a gangster who could put on a good "front" (4). Irving Berlin's lyrics for the original (1928/29) version of "Puttin' on the Ritz" yield another and far more famous illustration.<sup>7</sup> Lines in his song, the expressions of casual racism excised from the 1946 version, satirized blacks from Harlem for "puttin' on the Ritz" or, in Burnett's terms, for "dressing up." Berlin had his Harlemites strutting and flitting down New York's

Lennox Avenue, not “Boul’ Mich,” but, like Blue, they were cast “spending every dime” on clothes and good times. Those who heard the song or watched the film were asked to watch these “misfits . . . spend/ Their last two bits/ Puttin’ on the Ritz.” Students of American literature can recall an apposite example of condescension and social censure in Tom Buchanan’s criticism of Gatsby: “‘An Oxford man!’ [Tom] was incredulous. ‘Like hell he is! He wears a pink suit’” (122). Exposing Gatsby’s supposed pretensions, Tom exercises a sense of superiority not unlike that voiced through Berlin’s lyrics. In his mind, he acts as a defender of rank and exclusivity and speaks for some vague and spurious Anglo-Saxon virtues of restraint and refined taste.

Burnett, who admired *The Great Gatsby* (1925), paid homage to Fitzgerald’s masterwork in his fourth novel, *The Silver Eagle* (1931), where he created a Gatsbylike hero in Francis Cecil Harworth. Like Gatsby, Harworth (born Frank Keogh) has disguised his humble Midwest origins, Anglicized his name, and done all that he can to dress and act the part of a “gentleman.” As he confesses to himself, the gentleman he dresses up to be, the figure in a monocle and “correct” clothes that he’s created, remains little more than “pure fiction” (242-3). Harworth is an owner of nightclubs and downtown real estate, a self-made millionaire who has joined up with Chicago mobsters to make even more money. In what comes close to a flat parody of Gatsby’s pursuit of the “green light,” Harworth looks north to the city’s wealthy suburbs, to “the beacon at the end of some far off pier winking, alternately red and white” (289). He seeks, out of some undefined restlessness, to become part of Chicago’s smart set. Pursuing a beautiful divorcee in one such group of sophisticates, he carouses with assorted ne’er-do-wells and socialites, a painter, an avant-garde musician, and a mediocre novelist. Despite his earnest efforts to dress the part, Harworth is marked as an outsider by this sophisticated set, tainted by his ill-gotten money and unpolished manners. Berg Richman, the writer in this circle, inserts Harworth into his *roman a clef* about Chicago, satirizing him as “a manikin without feelings” (297). The insult is pronounced with the same sense of superiority as Tom Buchanan’s sneer about Gatsby’s pink suit.

The store manager in “Dressing Up” may not represent Chicago’s smart set, but he talks as if he were entitled to speak for that self-defined urbane and sophisticated few. As Blue and “his girl, Birdy,” enter the men’s clothing store, the manager says to one of the clerks: “‘Look at this, Al. The stockyards’re moving down town’” (673). His

judgment of Blue's appearance and clothing is peremptory and precise; he is expert at interpreting the clothes and class markers that define downtown shoppers. Blue has come to the store, as he says, to "shed these rags" for "something slick." He wants to "dress from the hide out" (673, 674). Naming and itemizing the clothes and accessories he wants in a rapid-fire recitation, he speaks knowledgeably, as if he is reading from a fully detailed and carefully considered shopping list. He has, it's clear, brooded long over his "rags," and, spurred by feelings of privation, he can finally let loose in a shopping spree calculated to quell his desires and shed his old identity with his old clothes.

Blue wears his new clothes with a self-conscious awareness of his appearance. He studies himself in the triple mirrors at the store, strikes a "pose in front of [his] living room mirror," and later stares at his reflected image in Charley's restaurant. There, for the benefit of Wing, the short-order cook, he unbuttons his shirt to show off his silk "lavender underwear." He asks him to admire his outfit, and the cook, who at first did not recognize him in the new clothes, admits that Blue's suit looks "red hot" (677-78). Whether the "red hot" Blue now feels that by "dressing up" he can hide in public never becomes clear. "Ain't I Boul' Mich'?"—the question that he so insistently poses—betrays self-doubt along with the self-possession that comes with being dressed in "slick" and stylish clothing (675, 677).

Blue's mirror-gazing, like any good running joke, grows funnier with each successive repetition. The joke was grounded in a fallible social belief, the notion that Chicago men were indifferent to the look of their clothes or the demands of fashion. The sketch artist and journalist Gene Markey (1895-1980), writing in *The Chicagoan* issue of 24 September 1927, contended that Chicagoans believed that "any man who cares how his coat fits, or who takes more than two minutes to buy a hat, is effeminate." He charged this cavalier attitude up to "the big, breezy spirit of the middle-west" and a certain "mob psychology." No wonder Markey forced the conclusion that "Chicago men [are] the worst dressed—in the world" (14).

This was mostly comic exaggeration. Though the boulevardier or the flaneur is not a common figure in Chicago fiction, much less a character type who set the pattern for metropolitan masculinity, this impeccably dressed—sometimes swaggering, sometimes strolling—male made his unmistakable appearance on the city's streets and boulevards in the 1920s. With a comic flair, Burnett's Blue signaled this arrival in

“Dressing Up.” Sporting gangster bravado, muscular toughness, and a taste for high fashion, he illustrated one version of “Boul’ Mich” style, a style that fit “the City of the Big Shoulders.” In a 1927 fashion column, “The Chicagoman Dresses for the Boulevard,” Edward Grossfeld put it this way: “Saturday afternoon on Michigan Avenue finds Chicago at its best, or perhaps in its best—or we are writing of male clothing.” Grossfeld reluctantly acknowledged that gangsters—he calls them “sporting [gentlemen]” and “unrefined fellows”—walked and strolled Michigan Avenue, mixing with those who were in “impeccable dress.” Grossfeld suggests that these “unrefined fellows” favored “the so-called Broadway style,” wore loud plaids and bright colors, costumes that might have been ready-made for *Guys and Dolls* (*The Chicagoan* 31 December 1927: 31).

Veteran newsmen who daily reported on Chicago gangsters presented a different and more complex picture of the city’s well-dressed bootleggers, mob bosses, and hit men like Blue. Pasley, in his biography of Capone, described Jake Lingle, a fixer, gangster, Capone friend, and fraudulent *Chicago Tribune* reporter as:

always newly tailored, manicured, shined and polished. He was vaguely embarrassed about the newness of his clothes; never entirely at ease in them; he seemed to be expecting his shoes to squeak. He was Midwest—Chicago. No cane for him; no spats; no yellow chamois or doeskin gloves; none of that “rose-in-the buttonhole stuff” his friend Capone affected (274).

Capone wore brightly colored suits, pearl gray Borsalino hats, and lavender shirts (Kobler 307). And yet, Louis Dinato, reputed to be Capone’s favorite tailor, advertised “correctness in every detail” and “smart tailored clothes for The Chicagoan” (figure 3).<sup>8</sup> The two illustrations Dinato placed in his *Chicagoan* display ads pictured boulevardiers, walking stick in hand, a lapel handkerchief tucked in a suit pocket, as jaunty and correct as any London or Paris dandy. It’s just possible Capone saw his likeness projected in such images.

In short, the literary conventions—and the iconography that defined the Chicago gangster on stage and screen and in news stories—were not so firm and fixed in 1929 that Burnett felt obliged to dress all his fictional gangsters in “flash suits” and wild patterns. The fictional Blue, unmannered and crude though he is, exhibits restrained and conventional taste in selecting two expensive suits. Far from choosing electric colors or bold pin stripes, after “a long consulta-

DINATO  
TAILORS  
337 West Monroe Street



CORRECTNESS  
in every detail  
has long character-  
ized the artistry  
of DINATO

Figure 3: "Dinato Tailors: 337 West Monroe," *The Chicagoan* 15 Sept. 1926, display ad. Reprinted by permission of Quigley Publishing Company, a division of QP Media, Inc.

tion,” he picks out a “blue serge single-breasted and a gray double-breasted” suit (674). His choices closely match the “clean cut town and business suit” that Kuppenheimer promoted for “every man” (*Post* 26 March 1927: 94-5). Blue’s restraint may be exaggerated for comic effect, but in context his tasteful choices of suits, shirts, and hats seem perfectly plausible. These are clothes he could wear while strolling Michigan Avenue, a proof of his urbane style and his place on Boul’ Mich.’ His choices and his taste conform, in most every way, to the advice columns in *The Chicagooan*: “The Boulevardier,” “The Chicagoman,” “The Outer Man,” and “Your Hat and Stick.” Burnett mimics their fashion tips and, with comic flair, restates their prohibitions and rules.

The trade magazine *Chicago Commerce* once staked out the claim that “Chicago fashions are as closely followed as those of London, Paris, and New York.” The author, Albert Mathews, asserted that “smartly dressed men seen in Fifth Avenue, Piccadilly, or the boulevards of every mart and capital . . . are wearing the products of the genius and intelligence of . . . Chicago” (Mathews 32). Whether Chicago’s merchant tailors and clothing manufacturers ever defined the beau ideal of the urbane and virile male in the 1920s—and influenced London, Paris, and New York—is a question that escapes any simple or ready answer here. What Burnett’s story of “Dressing Up” tells us is that Chicago men—both gangsters and the “very, very best people”—were aware of the same metropolitan and masculine ideal and they dressed up to pursue it. For Burnett the spectacle of their stylish uniformity, the mingling of gangsters and the “best people” on Boul’ Mich,’ provoked a hard second look and then restrained laughter.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Burnett said this in a 1981 interview by David Laurence Wilson, “Hello, Everyone” Stark House Press: Newsletter 1.5 (September 2011): no page. Web. <[ollerman.com/stark-house/shnews0105.html](http://ollerman.com/stark-house/shnews0105.html)>.

<sup>2</sup>Marilyn C. Wesley, discusses “Dressing Up” in “The Paradox of Virility: Narrative Violence in a Modern Anthology.” *Journal of the Short Story in English* 15 (Autumn 1999): 2-9. Her commentary is the most recent interpretation of the story, and, it appears, the only comment since 1930. She argues, quite plausibly, that Blue’s “expensive clothing” and the pride in his violence represent “the absolute need for positive masculine identity” (2). Web. <<http://jsse.revues.org/245#article-245>>.

<sup>3</sup>See John W. Stamper, *Chicago’s North Michigan Avenue: Planning and Development, 1900-1930* (Chicago: U of Chicago, 1991), for a thorough and well-illustrated study of Michigan Avenue in the 1920s.

<sup>4</sup> All references to *The Chicagoan* will be cited parenthetically in the text. Web. <<http://chicagoan.lib.uchicago.edu/utf/search?static=home>>. References to "Dressing Up" and *The Saturday Evening Post* will also be given parenthetically in the text. Other striking cover illustrations using Michigan Avenue in *The Chicagoan*: Ed Morgan's "Aware" (14 January 1928), Nat Karson's "Nightlights" (15 March 1930), and Aaron Bohrod's simply named "Boulevard" (6 November 1930).

<sup>5</sup>In the 12 January 1929 column, "The Chicagoan's Town Talk," the author informed readers about the fashionable spots where they could be "surrounded by our very, very best people" (22). In another *Chicagoan* column, readers were advised to avoid first nights at the theater and opera. They were certain to encounter "alky kings, moonshine princes, beer barons, muscle men," those "who compose the aristocracy of our racketeers." See Charles Collins, "The Stage: Fretful First Nighters" (31 December 1927: 19).

<sup>6</sup>For a compact biography of Leyendecker see "J.C. Leyendecker (1874-1951)." Web. <<http://www.saturdayeveningpost.com/artists-gallery/saturday-evening-post-cover-artists/jc-leyendecker-art-gallery/j-c-leyendecker-biography>>.

<sup>7</sup>For Berlin's original lyrics, go to the web at: <[lyricsfreak.com/i/irving+berlin/puttin+on+the+ritz\\_20068108.html](http://lyricsfreak.com/i/irving+berlin/puttin+on+the+ritz_20068108.html)>.

<sup>8</sup>"Dinato Tailors" ran ads in *The Chicagoan* on 15 September 1926 and 1 October 1926. See "Dragnet" or "Posts Tagged Louis Dinato" for a brief note on "Al Capone's Tailor." Web. <<http://idiomation.wordpress.com/tag/louis-dinato/>>.

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## THE STRAW HAT IN DREISER'S *AN AMERICAN TRAGEDY*

WILLIAM BREVDA

In 1920s literature the straw hat in men's fashion was a sign and symbol of conformity, standardization, and social constructionism, instrumental in the development of what Joanne Finkelstein terms "the fashioned self."<sup>1</sup> Appropriately, the straw hat, or boater, as it is sometimes called, is central to the plot and theme of one of the major novels of that decade, *An American Tragedy* (1925). Not only does protagonist Clyde Griffiths employ the straw hat in his plot to murder his pregnant girlfriend, Roberta Alden, he dons it as part of his effort to dress to impress his socialite girlfriend, Sondra Finchley. Moreover, the straw hat, suggestive of the phrase "straw man," functions thematically to indicate Clyde's inherent vacuity, emphasizing his inauthenticity, absence of identity, and lack of direct responsibility for Roberta's death, thus contributing to the novel's naturalistic orientation and furthering Dreiser's use of its fictional elements to demonstrate determinism.

Theodore Dreiser based *An American Tragedy* on the Chester Gillette-Grace Brown criminal case but updated the time of the action to the early 1920s.<sup>2</sup> In writing the novel, Dreiser wanted to dramatize a deterministic thesis that the true reasons for the crime were the "conditions and circumstances" of American society: namely, "its craze for social and money success" ("I Find" 12). As in *Sister Carrie* (1900), the "persuasion of fashion" becomes a means to achieve financial and social success (*Sister* 88). Dreiser was no doubt familiar with Herbert Spencer's theory that fashion is basically imitation. In *The Principles of Sociology* (1883), Spencer points out that the motives of fashion are reverence or competition (205-206).

According to Spencer, fashion tends “to obscure, and eventually to obliterate, the marks of class-distinction” (210).

Consistent with Spencer's theory of fashion discussed above, Dreiser's protagonist imitates the clothing styles of a series of models in a futile attempt to escape his class-bound destiny. As many critics have pointed out, Clyde lacks an authentic self; he defines himself from without, through costuming and role playing (Fisher 140-141; Orlov 76). Clyde's most important style model is his double from across the class divide, his wealthy cousin Gilbert, whom he physically resembles. Clyde is initially given a job in the shrinking department of his uncle's collar factory, but when his uncle sees him “in an armless shirt and trousers and working among these men,” he promotes him to a supervisory position more befitting his status as the owner's nephew (225). One of the girls in his department is Roberta Alden, the working-class Grace Brown character from the original murder case. Meanwhile, Clyde has also met Sondra Finchley, the much embellished upper-class Harriet Benedict character, also from the original murder triangle. An heiress to the Finchley Electric Sweeper Company (she has a bulldog named Bissell), Sondra sweeps Clyde off his feet. With help from a “friendly haberdasher” named Orrin Short, Clyde begins to dress to fit the part in “[t]hat world of wealth and social position she lived in” (315).

After Roberta becomes pregnant and threatens to expose him, Clyde's first thought of killing her comes to him when he reads a newspaper article about a drowning:

ACCIDENTAL DOUBLE TRAGEDY AT PASS LAKE—  
UPTURNED CANOE AND FLOATING HATS REVEAL PROBABLE  
LOSS OF TWO LIVES AT RESORT NEAR PITTSFIELD—  
UNIDENTIFIED BODY OF GIRL RECOVERED—THAT OF  
COMPANION STILL MISSING. (438)

The article identifies the man's floating hat as a “straw hat with a white and blue band” (439). Clyde is appalled that he could think about murdering Roberta and make it appear that they had both drowned: “what devil's whisper—what evil hint of an evil spirit” (440). But in this novel the closest thing to a devil is your “friendly haberdasher”!

Unable to resist the lure of “Sondra and all that she represented”—namely, “the solution of every material and spiritual desire”—and inspired by the “floating hats,” Clyde plots the murder

of Roberta (466). He will tell her that before they get married they should take a trip together. In Utica, he will “buy a second straw hat” (474). When Roberta is not looking, he will put the old straw hat in his suitcase. The “extra straw hat” is the one he will leave on the water (477). After he kills her in the rowboat, he will retrieve the straw hat from his suitcase left on shore and make his escape. He will travel to Twelfth Lake where the wonderful Sondra awaits him. When they find the floating hats, no one will be able to identify him because the man’s hat will contain “no lining or other method of identification,” Clyde having removed it (544).

Having formulated this not-so-brilliant plan, or rather copied it from a newspaper story, Clyde meets Roberta for their supposed excursion. Any suspicions Roberta might have had about Clyde’s sudden change of heart are allayed by his appearance: “his light gray suit, his new straw hat, his brightly polished shoes” (473). It should be noted that Clyde’s “new straw hat” is not the duplicate one that he intends to buy in Utica. Although Roberta is impressed by this hat, the real reason he bought it must have been to look good for Sondra at Twelfth Lake.

In order to shape the novel in his desired direction, Dreiser altered a number of facts from the Chester Gillette-Grace Brown case. His most significant change was, of course, the killing itself. Chester probably hit Grace with a tennis racket before she ended up at the bottom of the lake (Brandon 134-135). In the novel’s central irony, one that furthers Dreiser’s deterministic thesis, Clyde’s planned killing ends up being an accidental one. He unintentionally strikes her with a camera and capsizes the boat. Clyde doesn’t try to save the drowning Roberta, and he proceeds with his original plan after he swims to shore. The chapter ends with a sentence that prominently features the straw hat: “And a youth making his way through a dark, uninhabited wood, a dry straw hat upon his head, a bag in his hand, walking briskly and yet warily—south—south” (494).

At the Gillette-Brown crime scene, Chester’s straw hat was found floating near the upside down boat (Brandon 132). Grace had also been wearing a straw hat, but she left it at the hotel (Brandon 132). In the novel, Roberta wears a less stylish hat than straw in order for Dreiser to highlight the difference between Roberta and Sondra in Clyde’s imagination. A more crucial change Dreiser made concerns the escape hat. After swimming to shore, Chester put on dry clothes and a “black slouch hat” retrieved from his suitcase left on shore

(Brandon 136). The second straw hat that figures so importantly in the novel is Dreiser's own invention. As it turns out, Clyde's duplicate hat ruse was a major flaw in his plan. In making his escape through the woods, he meets three men who will remember that he had on a straw hat (507). Other witnesses will later testify to seeing him in a straw hat when he had registered at an inn and a lodge under fictitious names with Roberta, his putative wife. The coroner's suspicions of foul play are aroused by the fact that "the man's straw hat found floating on the water in Moon Cove" "contained no lining or other method of communication" (543, 544).

After Clyde is arrested, he has no plausible explanation for "having two straw hats—the one found on the lake and the one [he] wore away from there" (584). At the trial, one of the prosecution's witnesses is the clerk at the Utica haberdashery who sold Clyde the duplicate straw hat. When Clyde is asked about the two hats on the witness stand, he provides a coached explanation: "Well, the one hat was soiled and seeing one that he liked he bought it. Then when he lost the hat in the accident he naturally put on the other" (693). Long before he is found guilty of murder, Clyde realizes his mistake: "If only he had not worn that second straw hat" (572).

What accounts for Clyde Griffiths's fatal hat ploy? What was he thinking? What was Dreiser thinking? The simple answer is that Clyde was thinking about Sondra and Twelfth Lake. Clyde is entranced by this summer community of pavilions and lodges where the wealthy families of Lycurgus build large houses they call "bungalows" and boathouses for their electric launches (148, 144). When Clyde is with Sondra at Twelfth Lake, he believes he is "in Paradise" (445). Dreiser may have changed the name of Seventh Lake to Twelfth Lake to create an ironic contrast to the Biblical symbolism of the number twelve (as, for example, the twelve gates of the New Jerusalem in Revelations 21: 10-14). Clyde would not have wanted to be seen in a "gated" community like Twelfth Lake in anything but the sporting attire of the Lycurgus "smart set" (148), attire that would not be complete without a straw hat.

The straw hat is significant not only because it was the most popular and fashionable hat for a man at an Adirondack summer resort in these years but also because it is seasonal headgear. If Clyde had shown up in Twelfth Lake in a black slouch hat, he would have been wearing it out of season. Straw Hat Day was already being strictly observed in 1906, when it probably would have been in June

(Steinberg 222). An artist's impression of Chester Gillette escaping in the woods shows him carrying a suitcase and wearing a jacket and tie, a detachable collar, and a conspicuous dark slouch hat (Brandon 128). By the early 1920s, when the novel is set, the hat industry had so regimented Straw Hat Day as May 15 that a conventional person like Clyde Griffiths would have been too afraid of the social consequences not to observe it (Steinberg 222). As Spencer points out, clothes etiquette in modern society is regulated by social opinion rather than by class rule (209). In *The Psychology of Dress* (1929), Elizabeth Hurlock identifies the phenomenon of "'Straw Hat' Fear" and writes that "[n]ot one man in ten thousand, would risk being made the butt of attention and ridicule by failure to conform" (42).

As W. A. Swanberg notes, the "villain" of *An American Tragedy* is convention (293), but it could also be said that the villain of the novel is the man in the straw hat. Since Clyde lacks an authentic self, this straw man becomes Clyde's identity. In the Gillette case, the district attorney argued that because many people were aware of Chester's relationship with Grace Brown, he had to create a make-believe boyfriend for her: "He thought that he could manufacture a straw man, a man who didn't exist, and that he could put the girl in company of that unknown man on a deep Adirondack lake and that he could leave her to die there and leave an unnamed hat floating on the water and an unknown name upon the register" (qtd. in Brandon 226).

Dreiser took this idea and compounded it. Not only does Clyde manufacture a straw man companion for Roberta by signing false names and leaving an unnamed straw hat floating on the lake; Dreiser also portrays Clyde as little more than a straw man manufactured by himself and others. Clyde manufactured Gilbert's appearance. He manufactured someone else's crime he read about. His defense attorneys manufactured a sympathetic straw man for the jury. The district attorney manufactured an unsympathetic straw man for the jury. Will the real Clyde Griffiths please take off your straw hat!

In the largest sense, Dreiser wanted to show that Clyde was a straw man manufactured by society to desire superficial, unimportant things. In doing so, Dreiser plays on one of the meanings of the word "straw": something of trifling significance or little value, as it is used in the sayings, "I don't care a straw" and "the straw that broke the camel's back." That is to say, Clyde was conditioned to desire straw, or rather, straw hats. Since society values straw hats, the implication is that society is trying to make something out of nothing, for

fashion, according to Roland Barthes, “is nothing except what it is said to be” (“Literature Today” 152). Unfortunately, Clyde’s situation is hopeless because Dreiser is a naturalist who believes that “[a]mong the forces which sweep and play throughout the universe, untutored man is but a wisp [of straw] in the wind” (*Sister Carrie* 57). Dreiser’s old “wisp in the wind” trope from *Sister Carrie* can be added to the other plays on “straw” in *An American Tragedy*. Clyde’s illusion of social mobility is brought out not only by his working in a detachable collar factory and being executed in “a white shirt without a collar” (809; Mulligan 134); it is also implicit in Clyde’s position in the factory as little more than a straw boss.

Another recurring word in *An American Tragedy* that looks like and sounds like “straw” is “star.” When Clyde takes Roberta to the Starlight Amusement Park, they dance, and their relationship becomes more physical. (This foreshadowing of sex and disaster could be termed a “straw in the wind.”) After Roberta has sexually yielded, Clyde reads about Sondra in the society columns of *The Star*. Later, Roberta reads about Clyde in *The Star* after he gains entry to Lycurgus society. Sondra realizes that to Clyde, “more than anyone else . . . she shone as a star, a paragon of luxury and social supremacy” (364). This adulation makes him attractive to her. At the trial, Clyde’s attorney describes Sondra as “the brightest constellation of all his dreams” (670). The defense that Clyde was “bewitched” by Sondra fails to persuade the jury in part because the prosecution produces the clerk at the Star Haberdashery in Utica where Clyde bought the duplicate straw hat. After he is convicted, Clyde’s religious mother comes East from her mission The Star of Hope.

The star and the straw are important images in the nativity of Jesus, but their effect in this inversion of the Christian rags-to-riches story is mainly ironic. In the woods after Roberta’s drowning, Clyde thinks: “And the stars overhead—bright and yet soft, as at Pine Point where Sondra was. If she could see him now, slipping away from Roberta dead in that lake, his own hat upon the waters there!” (529). Clyde unconsciously echoes a verse from the Bible that he must have heard many times as a boy at the Door of Hope Mission: “Cast thy bread upon the waters: for thou shalt find it after many days.” The traditional interpretation of this passage from Ecclesiastes 11:1 is that it “exhorts us to practice charity from which a reward at long last may be reaped” (*Interpreter’s* 81). It was not charity that Clyde was practicing when he cast his straw hat upon the waters.

In *The Golden Bough*, Frazer connects the Hebrew verse in Ecclesiastes 11:1 to the vegetation festival of Adonis. Baskets filled with crops were cast upon waters to obtain a rich harvest in return (*Interpreter's* 81). During the 1920s, this ancient practice was mimicked by the fashion system and mocked by writers such as Dreiser, Fitzgerald, and Dos Passos. Clyde Griffiths, Jay Gatsby, and the man who was killed for wearing a straw hat out of season in *Manhattan Transfer* are travesties of Adonis and martyrs of the fashion system. According to Barthes, "Fashion obeys the law of myth in its attempt to present its conventions as natural facts" (qtd. in Culler 75). "To every thing there is a season," (Ecclesiastes 3:1), saith the Preacher of fashion. Every man will begin wearing his straw hat on May 15 and stop wearing it on September 15. The system is as authoritarian as it is arbitrary. To quote Thoreau, "we worship not the Graces, nor the Parcae, but Fashion. She spins and weaves and cuts with full authority" (17). To cite Barthes, "it is obviously because fashion is tyrannical and its sign arbitrary that it must convert its sign into a natural fact or a rational law" (*The Fashion System* 263). In *The Great Gatsby*, the golden hat returns nothing except death. In *An American Tragedy*, the straw hat returns nothing except an ironic new meaning to the term "boater."

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#### NOTES

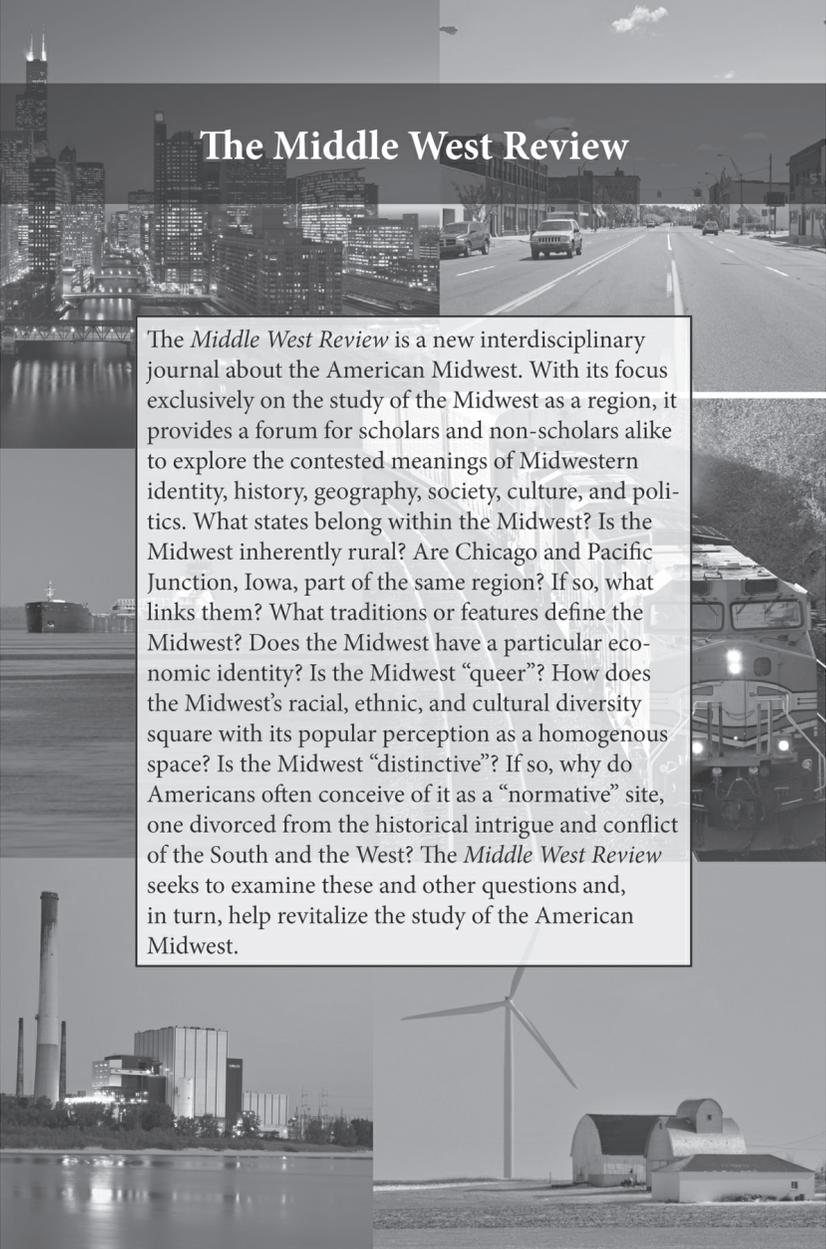
<sup>1</sup>The straw hat is a stiff oval hat with a narrow brim and flat-topped crown that has a band around it. The vogue of the boater as a fashionable and popular summer hat for men in Europe and America lasted from the 1880s through the 1920s.

<sup>2</sup>Gillette had been found guilty of murdering his pregnant working-class girlfriend, Grace Brown, in a staged boating accident in order to free himself to be with the upper-class Harriet Benedict. He was executed in 1908.

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