

The 'New Woman Clothing'

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ABSTRACT:

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

KEY WORDS: Clothing, New Woman, Freedom

INTRODUCTION:

The New Woman has always been a figure of controversy. Even before she was 'named' in 1894 by writer and feminist Sarah Grand, Eliza Lynn Linton's 1868 essay 'The girl of the period' demonstrated how she was present in society. There is no singular definition of the new woman, which creates uncertainty surrounding her identity. The New Woman attracted a lot of criticism and sparked debate on both sides of the Atlantic and around the world. Who was she and where did she come from? What did she represent? Would she be lost? Was she to be celebrated as the agent and sign of progress or revealed as a traitor to the traditional family and by extension her race?

The New Woman created many questions about female independence and the position of woman in society and arguably many of these are still left unanswered. The new woman has been subject to a vast amount of research, with critics such as Sally Ledger, Marion Shah, Lyssa Randolphs and Lyn Pykett, examining the role of New Woman in the nineteenth century. The New Woman's clothing reflects her intrinsic sense of independence. Clothing is an integral part in the construction of a character. Assumptions are automatically made about both characters and people based on their appearance. Jean Arnold explains that this is because rather than building an identity over time through consistency of moral actions within a community, an individual can build an immediate, instant identity. This raises questions about the ambiguity of clothing because as we have seen clothing can be consciously used to create a certain identity conversely it can be unconsciously used to express someone's character. However, I am focusing on how clothing reflects aspects of character, while analyzing the problematic way in which assumptions are made about people based on their clothing.

This dissertation will destabilize the nineteenth century assumptions that the characteristics of 'ideal womanhood' are inherent to all women. I will argue that the 'New Woman' is characterized by her innate sense of freedom and independence, looking at the multi-layered representations of clothing in a selection of

James and Wharton's literature to show how dress reflects the 'New Woman's' 'inner' identity and liberation from society.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE :

'The New Woman Clothing' this study consists of essays by distinguished academics and scholars on a variety of topics. This thesis introduces the contemporary debates comprising the various aspects of the New Woman.

NOVELS:- Using Henry James's *Daisy Miller* the *Portrait of a lady*, Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence* and the *House of Mirth*, will analyze how *Daisy Miller*, *Isabel Archer*, *Ellen Olenska* and *Lily Bart* character's contrast to the traditional understanding of the New Woman because they are simply trying to have control over their own lives. This idea led to the development of my argument that for many characters being a 'New Woman' is not about making a wider political statement such as argue for the vote, it is about personal liberation. A key way in which the 'New Woman' expresses her individuality and freedom is through her clothing. However, *Isabel's* dress conforms to the expectations of society. Therefore, I will use her as an example to show the 'New Woman' identity is not always fixed and stable.

WHO IS THE 'NEW WOMAN':

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

New Woman 'rejected social conventions, especially those imposed on women. These women fought stagnation. They acted on their own'. The independence which the New Woman displays echoes that of the 'New Woman', raising awareness of the overlap between the New Woman as a political figure and the 'New Woman' as a personal figure. The 'New Woman' is a figure who does not consistently follow society's expectations. She embraces her own sense of freedom, which leads her to unconsciously challenge social conventions. The 'New Woman' is defined by her sense of innocence and freedom reinforcing her as a private figure, contrasting her to the New Woman as a public figure who argued for a social and political change. *Isabel*, *Daisy*, *Ellen* and *Lily* are all different characters; however their sense of independence, innocence and freedom unites them. They are all 'natural' characters because they do not repress aspects of their identity in order to conform to society, although *Lily* at times manipulates her identity in order to 'fit in' to different social situations. However, as *Isabel* has demonstrated, the 'New Woman' can repress her identity, but this ultimately results in her unhappiness. In this paper I have outlined how my chosen female characters conform to the 'New Woman' ideal.

CLOTHING THE 'NEW WOMAN':

The 'New Woman's' clothing is a medium for her to reflect her own freedom and liberation from society. This paper will focus on the initial introductions to Daisy Miller, Ellen Olenska and Lily Bart, examining how their clothing immediately contrasts them to the 'conventional' nineteenth-century woman who are epitomized in the characters of Pansy Gilbert and May Wellend. This first part of this paper will outline some of the different ideas about clothing in the nineteenth century in order to create an understanding about the significance of dress. The second part of this paper will analyse the introductions to each of the 'New Women' looking at how Daisy, Ellen and Lily's dress challenges expectations of society. It will also briefly mention how Isabel Archer contrasts to the other 'New Women' because her clothing conforms to expectations of society and the significance of this for her character. 'During the second half of the nineteenth century the subject [of dress] was, seen in a different light, becoming a matter of important social concern', with women's clothing becoming an object of focus and reform. In 1851, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Amelia Bloomer, 'two leading American feminist writers and activists', challenged the assumption that it was only men who wore trousers by wearing 'a costume which consisted of a sack coat, a loose-waisted dress which fell only to the knees and a pair of draped trousers, gathered at the ankle'. This style of dress was understood to be more practical compared to the fashionable mid-nineteenth century restrictive 'form-fitting bodices, tightly laced corsets and swelling skirts which not only enhanced the natural contours of the feminine form but also underlined women's dependent status'.

This paper has demonstrated the complexity surrounding the topic of women's clothing in the nineteenth century, analysing how key clothing reformists believed clothing should be practical and functional. Ecob wanted women's clothing to allow them to have adequate physical stimulation to aid mental stimulation and Bloomer wanted it to help with the freedom of movement. Such characters as Pansy and May offer a conventional view of women's simple clothing to reflect their conformity to expectations of nineteenth-century femininity. This then shows how the 'New Women' figures, of Daisy, Ellen and Lily, immediately contrast to the expectations of nineteenth century dress through their unusual clothing. This paper has specifically focused on what the first introductions say about the 'New Woman' and how this contrasts to the traditional understanding of clothing. Theorist Judith Butler addresses the social and political function of clothing in her book, *Gender Trouble*. She argues that the body 'is a border and boundary tenuously maintained for the purpose of social regulation and control' because society dictates what clothing is acceptable in order to ensure conformity. In the nineteenth century, women's white dress was a sign of youth, innocence and purity and had become almost mandatory formal wear for the Victorian *jeune fille*; white was also correct summer-wear in the nineteenth-century for most ages'. Therefore, women dressed in white in order to conform to expectations of society, which in turn meant that they were 'communicating' to others the characteristics suggested by the colour white.

INHABITING CLOTHING:

This paper has shown how Daisy, Ellen and Lily's clothing expresses their 'New Woman' identity from their first introductions. As each narrative progresses, we can see how Daisy, Ellen and Lily inhabit their clothing, showing how it becomes more than an object, it is a part of them. It has also been mentioned that Isabel's clothing conforms to expectations of nineteenth-century society, which ultimately leads to the repression of her 'New Woman' characteristics. It will also briefly analyses the way in which fashion is depicted in each text and the importance of it to the 'New Woman'. The sander explains that '[w]omen have been made synonymous with their bodies'. The female body is an 'object of social control', which is apparent in the restrictive nature of the corset both symbolically and physically limiting women's freedom. Here, it is important to make a distinction between fashionable dress and expectations of dress. Fashion and fashionable dress is taken to mean clothing designed primarily for its expressive and decorative qualities', whereas expectations of dress relate to the 'modest' dress of 'ideal womanhood'. The complexity of the term fashion is apparent in the nineteenth century because 'Kite strengthening of pervasive middleclass moral codes [...] sat

uneasily with the growing commodification of fashionable trends and interests'. Fashion while being a social construct, is also a problematic subject, because of the way the associations with ideas of vanity and frivolity undermine expectations of femininity. Therefore, each 'New Woman's' relationship with fashion is complex. Yet there residence to society's scrutiny about fashionable dress is apparent.

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

CONCLUSION:

Using the examples of Daisy Miller, Isabel Archer, Ellen Olenska and Lily Bart, we have seen how the 'New Woman' is characterized by her innate sense of freedom and liberty. One key way in which the 'New Woman' shows her independence is through her clothing. She is empowered because she is not repressing her identity in order to conform to society's expectation of femininity or dress. However, Isabel's clothing does conform to society's expectations, thus she is not expressing herself fully in order to conclude 'Clothing the "New Woman" it is imperative to examine how each 'New Woman' characters ends up in each narrative. the 'New Woman' is characterised by her innate sense of independence and liberty, and a key way in which she expresses her 'inner' identity is through her clothing. As we have seen there are different nuances in my understanding of the 'New Woman' and how she expresses her innate sense of independence; however, there is a common trend in the way that they embrace their sense of freedom and personal liberation. Whereas Isabel's clothing does not reflect her independence, making her 'New Woman' identity less stable, which leads to her ultimately having to repress her essence of freedom. Despite the endings of each narrative differing, there is a general sense that all the heroines end up in unfavorable situations. Daisy, Lily and Ellen are all ostracized from the society they try to inhabit. Both Daisy and Lily die and Isabel returns to her manipulative and controlling husband. Each 'New Woman' is ultimately 'punished' for her transgressive femininity and deviation from society, which suggests that society is not ready for a figure who expresses her independence from its rigid confines because the 'threat' is ultimately removed. Whether this can be conclusively stated across nineteenth-century literature is not something that can be definitively concluded due to the small selection of texts examined. This dissertation has only begun to examine the relationship between the 'New Woman' and clothing, therefore, to further this research a wider analysis of texts would need to be studied, including different authors to examine the way the 'New Woman's' clothing reflects her character.

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