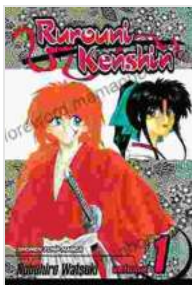


Dress and Identity in British Literary Culture, 1870-1914: A Long Tail of Meaning

The period from 1870 to 1914 was a time of great social and cultural change in Britain. The Industrial Revolution had transformed the country's economy and society, and the rise of the middle class had led to a new consumer culture. These changes had a profound impact on the way people dressed, and clothing became increasingly important as a way of expressing individual and social identity.

Dress as Self-Expression

In the Victorian era, clothing was often used as a way to express one's personality and style. This was especially true for women, who had limited opportunities for self-expression outside of the domestic sphere. Fashion magazines and department stores played a major role in shaping consumer culture and influencing notions of identity and style. The rise of the 'New Woman' in the 1890s led to a more relaxed and informal style of dress that reflected the changing roles and expectations of women in society.



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by Rosy Aindow

★★★★☆ 4.7 out of 5

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One of the most famous examples of the use of dress for self-expression can be found in the novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* by Oscar Wilde. The protagonist, Dorian Gray, is a young man who sells his soul for eternal youth and beauty. As he descends into a life of hedonism and debauchery, his portrait ages and becomes increasingly hideous, while his own appearance remains unchanged. The contrast between Dorian's external beauty and his inner corruption is reflected in the way he dresses. In the early part of the novel, he is described as wearing "a suit of exquisite taste, a delicate piacere of lavender silk with a long waistcoat of white drill cloth and a pale lilac neckerchief". As he becomes more corrupt, his clothes become more extravagant and decadent, reflecting his inner state of mind.

Dress as Social Differentiation

Clothing was also used as a way to differentiate between different social classes in Victorian Britain. The upper classes wore elaborate and expensive clothes that were often made from luxurious fabrics such as silk and velvet. The middle classes wore more modest clothes that were still fashionable, while the working classes wore simple and often drab clothing. This distinction in dress helped to maintain the social hierarchy and to reinforce the class system.

In the novel *The Importance of Being Earnest* by Oscar Wilde, the protagonist, Algernon Moncrieff, uses his valet, Lane, to change his clothes several times a day. This allows him to maintain the appearance of being a wealthy and respectable gentleman, even though he is actually quite poor. Algernon's use of dress to deceive others is a reflection of the importance

of clothing in Victorian society. It also highlights the way in which clothing can be used to create a false identity.

Dress as Political Critique

Clothing could also be used as a tool for political and cultural critique. In the late 19th century, the Aesthetic Movement emerged as a reaction against the materialism and ugliness of Victorian society. Aesthetes such as Oscar Wilde and Aubrey Beardsley advocated for a return to beauty and art in all aspects of life, including fashion. They wore elaborate and unconventional clothes that were often inspired by historical and exotic styles. Their dress was a way of protesting against the prevailing social and cultural norms.

The suffragette movement also used dress as a form of political protest. Suffragettes wore white, purple, and green as a way of identifying themselves and their cause. These colors were chosen to represent purity, dignity, and hope. Suffragettes also wore simple and practical clothing that allowed them to participate in protests and marches. Their dress was a way of challenging the traditional gender roles and expectations of the time.

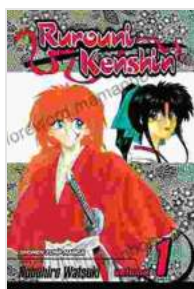
The relationship between dress and identity in British literary culture from 1870 to 1914 was complex and multifaceted. Clothing was used to express individual and social identity, to differentiate between different social classes, and to engage in political and cultural critique. By examining the ways in which dress was represented and understood in British literature during this period, we can gain a deeper understanding of the complex relationship between fashion, identity, and culture.

The legacy of this period can still be seen today in the way we use clothing to express ourselves and to shape our identities. Clothing is a powerful tool

that can be used to communicate a wide range of messages, from our personal style to our political beliefs. By understanding the history of dress and identity, we can gain a better appreciation of the role that clothing plays in our lives.

References

- *The Picture of Dorian Gray* by Oscar Wilde
- *The Importance of Being Earnest* by Oscar Wilde
- *Fashion and Identity in British Literary Culture, 1870-1914* by Patricia Marks
- *The Aesthetics of Dress: Fashion and the Construction of Identity* by Elizabeth Wilson



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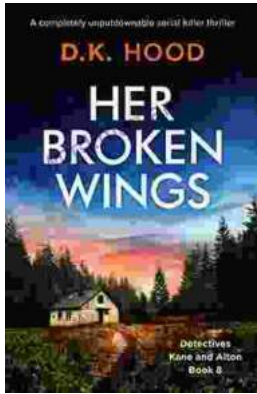
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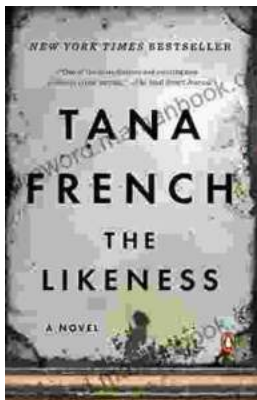
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