

What is 'Frock Consciousness'?

By Harriet Hall

Tuesday, 17 January 2012

Welcome to 'Frock Consciousness'. This blog will be devoted to all things sartorial.¹ This first post will explain what is meant by the term 'Frock Consciousness', and why it has been used as the title for this blog.

Virginia Woolf, author, essayist and feminist, had a curious relationship with dress. Her fascination with clothing was not limited to the everyday anxieties we all possess, but involved an intellectual interest in the psychology of clothes: the revealing and concealing of the identity, through the medium of fabric. She called this her 'Frock Consciousness'.

Virginia's 'Frock Consciousness' was revealed in her novels, in which she was seen to 'work the sartorial into her writing, to an extent that one may argue it constitutes much of its character' (R. S Koppen). Woolf frequently exposed an intellectual interest in, and her anxieties about dress, which she then transposed onto the characters of her novels, particularly on the eponymous heroine of her 1925 novel, *Mrs Dalloway*. *Mrs Dalloway's* working title was even *A Lady of Fashion*. Some characters in the novel cannot be viscerally² separated from their clothing- representing the intense importance dress has upon the persona.

A story sequence, which followed *Mrs Dalloway*, entitled *Mrs Dalloway's Party*, contained a story called *The New Dress*, about a woman named Mabel Waring, who arrives at a party and feels completely exposed and mortified, by her choice of dress. The story uses clothes to explore the levels of consciousness of the human psyche, revealing that identity and dress are inseparable. Clothes are shown to represent not only Mabel's outer-self but her entire being. The story confirms the argument of Flugel, who wrote, in his book *The Psychology of Clothes*, that 'clothes, in fact, though seemingly mere extraneous appendages, have entered into the very core of our existence as social beings'. Mabel is unable to escape what she is wearing, which is pressed further through her last name, 'Waring'.

Mabel's story also emphasised the temporality of fashion, a tool Woolf uses to represent modernity. It is perhaps no coincidence that Woolf was writing these stories at a time when women's relationship with dress was radically altering. Women

¹ Sartorial means of or pertaining to clothing, especially tailored clothing.

² Viscerally means emotionally, pertaining to feelings rather than intellect

were beginning to develop a new sense of autonomy in the 1920s, by cutting their hair short and wearing drop-waisted dresses which gave them boyish figures, thus rejecting society's attempts to bind them into corsets.

The primary choice for the title of this blog was the weight Woolf gave to the role of fashion in identity. This contradicted the views of some earlier feminists, and in fact, some later feminists. Outlined by Mary Wollstonecraft, a popular feminist view, was that 'it is not indeed the making of necessaries that weakens the mind, but the frippery of dress'. This blog is therefore an acknowledgement of the academic importance of dress as an area worthy of study, combined with a little frippery here and there.