

Billowing Frocks and Velvets: A Sartorial Study of *The Waves* and *Madame Bovary*

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Abstract: This essay attempts to show how Virginia Woolf and Gustave Flaubert similarly employ sartorial allusions in their fiction to portray the sexuality of their characters. In *The Waves*, Woolf dresses the promiscuity of Jinny with translucent and billowing dresses as Flaubert in *Madame Bovary* tailors for adulterous relationships the most alluring of outfits.

Novelists do not let their characters parade naked in the world they create as Clair Hughes states in *Dressed in Fiction* (2). Novels abound with references to dress, and sartorial allusions in literary texts have recently won critical attention. However, my study does not aim to explore the significance of garments in relation to class, gender, or fashion. It is rather a study of the similar use of the sartorial as a metaphor for sexuality by two major novelists, Virginia Woolf and Gustave Flaubert, because writers of fiction “have turned to items of attire to offer the reader the sort of information that he or she cannot receive through other narrative devices” (Stetz 62). In *Seeing Through Clothes*, Anne Hollander defines clothes as “objects made of fabric that convey messages beyond the power of the cloth itself to convey” (2). This essay aims to show the messages that the characters’ clothes convey in Woolf’s *The Waves* (1931) and Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* (1857).

Virginia Woolf, who coined the term “frock consciousness” (qtd. in Andrésdóttir 9), establishes the sartorial fabric of Jinny’s consciousness in the very first pages of *The Waves*. Jinny endows the first words she is learning at school with a sartorial aspect. She attributes lurid colors to these words, “yellow” and “fiery”, colors that evoke in her mind a sartorial element for nightwear, “a fiery dress, a yellow dress, a

fulvous dress to wear in the evening” (10). Even at prayer time, Jinny has her attention fixed on the teacher’s dress, assessing its texture, which is sheeny but opaque, and its suitability for the evening and the summer (18). Such observations trigger in her mind a sartorial stream of consciousness that enlightens the reader about the type of alluring dress, in contrast with her teacher’s, that she would like to wear in winter, “a thin dress shot with red threads that would gleam in the firelight” (18). Jinny stresses the color, transparency, and nocturnal quality of her array: “Then when the lamps were lit, I should put on my red dress and it would be as thin as a veil, and would wind about my body, and billow out as I came into the room, pirouetting” (18). The dress is not only red and very revealing, but it also winds round her body and swells when she twirls to reveal any remaining, hidden charms. Remarking on the same passage, Carrie Rohman, in her fascinating study *Choreographies of the Living: Bioaesthetics in Literature, Art, and Performance*, disapproves of reading Jinny’s musings as “superficial, concerned mainly with conventional notions of female beauty and fashion. One might even be tempted to spurn Jinny’s attention to sexual attractiveness, secretly scolding her for catering heteronormative definitions of women’s beauty and sexual availability” (94). For Rohman, the fact that Jinny desires such a dress “suggests a more intimate connection between Jinny’s body and the dress... it is part of her ‘energetic field’ in some sense” (94). I believe that this very intimacy between Jinny’s body and its attire, which constitutes part of her “energetic field”, is what connotes her promiscuity throughout the novel, and such sexual energy that Jinny nonchalantly displays does not make her a “shallow” character at all. R.S. Koppen, in her study *Virginia Woolf: Fashion and Literary Modernity*, observes that to Jinny “the sexual exchange economy has the appearance of ritual... enacted by dress” (148). Indeed, Jinny’s inner nature and aspirations are rendered in sartorial terms very early in the novel. She will lead a promiscuous life and her manner of dressing will decide her personal achievement. Her clothes, which will be dominantly white, yellow and red, are her indispensable tools.

One way of displaying her sartorial expertise at school is playing tennis. Besides being a chance to embark on constant motion with which Jinny is consistently associated, the game enables her to discard her school uniform, which is made of the coarse fabric of brown serge, and replace it with something more aesthetic: “let me be the first to

pull off these coarse clothes. Here are my clean white stockings. Here are my new shoes" (23); her hair will be bound with "a white ribbon" which "will stream out in a flash, yet curl round" her neck every time she leaps (23). Her tennis outfit anticipates the "billowing frock" of her later years, the sexual bait with which she will hook men. The tennis game and its elegant uniform become a metaphor for the sexual arousal of Jinny. Having won the game, she feels that everything in her body "is thinned out with running and triumph" and her blood is "bright red, whipped up, slapping against" her ribs (24). It is worth noting that both her blood and dress are characterized by thinness and redness. With her blood vigorously animated by sports, she begins to wish to be the center of one man's attention who prefers her sole company to any other woman's in some glamorous hall. She visualizes such a man heading to the "gilt chair" on which she sits, having received her sartorial, sexual signal, the "frock billowing" round her (25).

Upon leaving school, Jinny is adamant on wearing the white, sleeveless dress that connotes her future promiscuity: "I shall wear necklaces and a white dress without sleeves at night" (30). In response to such an attire, a man is bound to "single" her out and tell her "what he has told no other person", but Jinny is quite resolved not to be monogamous, not to allow herself to "be attached to one person only" or "to be fixed, to be pinioned" (30). Sitting in a train on her first day of the summer holiday, she experiences "rapture" when a man smiles at her "reflection in the tunnel" (34). Her sexual response is sartorial; her body reacts by instantly putting "forth a frill under his gaze", having "exchanged the approval" of their bodies (34). She imagines a future scene at the end of her train journey that interweaves the feeling of sexual rapture with the billowing dress: "a lamp-lit room with chairs, into one of which I sink, much admired, my dress billowing round me" (34). Koppen rightly states that "Jinny's fantasies of the future revolve around dress" (148).

In *Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity*, Elizabeth Wilson writes that it "is often said that dress enhances sexual attraction because it both reveals and conceals the body. Articles of dress become... essential to erotic arousal" (91). Indeed, Jinny is fully aware that dress enhances sex. She adorns her legs with silk, which will enable her to shine in the nocturnal world (55). Such sartorial preparations express her readiness for a sexual experience (55). At a concert, the sartorial sound, "swishing", of the attendees' cloaks forms the prelude to her nocturnal

rapture. She begins to unfold in such a fragrant and radiant setting “as a fern when its curled leaves unfurl” (56). On a similar occasion, the crude sexual intercourse between Jinny and Percival is heralded by a sartorial element, the seductive, yellow undulations of her evening, veil-thin, billowing dress: “Rippling gold, I say to him, ‘Come,’.... And he comes; he crosses the room to where I sit, with my dress like a veil billowing round me on the gilt chair. Our hands touch, our bodies burst into fire. The chair, the cup, the table – nothing remains unlit” (77). If “specific features of language have a direct sartorial equivalent” (6), as Rosy Aindow states in her analysis of Alison Lurie’s views on the language of dress, then one can think of Jinny’s transparent, yellow dress as the equivalent of her transparent verb “Come” which is laden with sexual connotations.

On one nocturnal adventure in the forest, Jinny specifies the sartorial tool, a yellow, red-spotted scarf, with which she has successfully allured a stranger: “Did my yellow scarf with the strawberry spots float and signal?” (98). The man pursues her into the forest where everything is “rapt” and “nocturnal”, where she feels her senses standing “erect” (98). The sexual intercourse that follows is dominantly auditory, rendered in crude, hunting terms: “Now my gold signal is like a dragonfly flying taut. Jug, jug, jug.... Now I hear the crash and rending of boughs and the crack of antlers as if the beasts of the forest were all hunting.... One has pierced me. One is driven deep within me” (98-99). As Stetz remarks in “‘A Language Spoken Everywhere’: Fashion Studies and English Studies”, the way characters “are clothed is as crucial and revealing as the actions they take” (62).

Summing up her achievements in later years, Jinny contrasts her imagination, which is purely “the body’s”, with her schoolmate’s visions which “are finespun and white with purity” (125). She resents what is aesthetic in Louis’ life, such as his “lean cats” and “blistered chimney-pots”, and asserts her own sartorial interest in a variety of clothing items such as “uniforms, wigs and gowns, bowler hats and tennis shirts beautifully open at the neck” (125). Clothes never escape Jinny’s attention, “I note all clothes always” (125). She is absorbed in all types of women’s dresses to which she gravitates: “I eddy with them, in and out, in and out, into rooms, into halls” (125). While Louis is immersed in his writing and calculations, Jinny is decisively deliberating on “what yellow or white, what shine or dullness, what loop or straightness suits” to wear in preparation for a sexual encounter (125). It is interesting that

these references to sartorial preparations culminate in a description of the kind of intimacy in which she would indulge when thus arrayed. It is crude sex with no sentimental attachments or memorabilia: "as we murmured all the secrets of our hearts... we have sunk to ashes, leaving no relics, no unburnt bones, no wisps of hair to be kept in lockers such as your intimacies leave behind them" (125-26).

In *Madame Bovary*, Flaubert similarly employs sartorial elements in his presentation of sexual themes. At the very beginning of the novel, Emma's dissatisfaction with her marriage is rendered in sartorial terms. Disillusioned with her own honeymoon, she presents a picture of the ideal husband that Charles does not meet. In some exotic place, her partner is supposed to be dressed in velvet, "a black, long-skirted velvet coat, soft leather boots, a pointed hat, and ruffles at his wrist" (38). Embarrassed by her husband's appearance, Emma adjusts his clothes for him, discarding any items that do not conform to her standards of the aesthetic; she "would tuck the edge of his red knitted jersey out of sight beneath his waistcoat, straighten his cravat and throw away the faded gloves which he was quite gaily proposing to put on. It was not for him... that she did these things, but for herself" (58). Charles's lack of sartorial elegance becomes a metaphor for his own sexual inadequacy: "All the flat nonentity of his character seemed to be displayed upon the surface of his coat" (95). His sex is monotonous and functional, a mere habit, making love to her "at certain fixed times... a sort of sweet course to look forward after the monotony of dinner" (41). Thus, yearning for the "velvets" that she does not possess in the "drabness of her home", she indulges in "fantastic dreams of luxury, uxorious tenderness, a longing for the pleasures of adultery" (103). Flaubert weaves luxury, the sartorial in particular, with the theme of adultery throughout the novel.

Shortly after meeting her for the first time, Rodolphe reveals his sexual interest in Madame Bovary in sartorial terms: "He conjured up a picture of Emma dressed as he had seen her in the parlour, and he began mentally to undress her" (124). Hers, like Jinny's, is yellow, "a light summer dress of a yellow colour, long in the waist, with four flounces and a very full skirt" (122). In their interesting study "'We'll simply have to dress the character': Dressed Bodies Do Matter in James Joyce's *Ulysses*", Margarita Estévezsaá and Noemí Pereira-Ares state that male characters are equally aware of the sensual potential of clothes (263). Likewise, Rodolphe makes the prelude to the seduction of

Emma sartorial. His remarkable leather boots and a velvet coat are the sexual baits with which he lures Emma into an adulterous relationship with him: "Rodolphe was wearing a pair of high boots made of some soft leather. He had acted on the assumption that Emma had probably never seen anything of the sort before. She was, indeed, delighted with his appearance when she saw him on the stairs wearing a full-skirted coat of velvet and white stockinette breeches" (149). The sexual intercourse that shortly follows is rendered in sartorial terms: "The cloth of her habit caught upon the velvet of his coat. She threw back her head, and her white throat fluttered in a sigh. She melted, and then, with tears streaming down her cheeks, with a shudder... she gave herself to him" (152). To fortify similar future performances, Emma makes the enhancement of her wardrobe with a variety of fabrics such as "dimity petticoats, neck-handkerchiefs, colarettes, drawers with running strings, enormous round the hips and tapering at the bottom" (179) the pivot of her domestic life.

Emma's second lover Leon, who would invest in "a dressing gown, a Basque beret, a pair of blue velvet slippers" (111), has similar sartorial rituals that precede his sexual intercourse with Emma for the first time in a carriage. He visualizes her sartorial advent into the church in a "flounced dress, her gold lorgnon, her dainty boots" (232). His own preparation for the seduction of Emma is fabric-oriented. With "a pair of white trousers, the thinnest of thin socks, and a green coat" (231), he manages to initiate her into a regular, sexual relationship with him. When in the grip of a wild passion, Emma demonstrates it to Leon in a sartorial manner: "She flung off her clothes with a sort of brutal violence, tearing at her thin stay-lace so that it hissed about her hips like a slithering snake" (274). To make him conform to her idea of the ideal lover, Emma would urge Leon to enhance his sartorial glamour, and hence his sexual performance, by dressing like King Louis XIII "entirely in black and to grow a little chin-tuft" (269).

The sexual advances of the lawyer Théodore who is willing to pay Emma's debts in return for sexual favors are also preceded by a sartorial depiction. He responds to the call of the bells in "his red waistcoat" (293). Then, he receives Emma in the warmth of his hearth "clutching his palm-embroidered dressing gown to his side with his left hand, while, with his right, he kept on taking off and quickly replacing his purple velvet skull-cap" (293). Then as he consumes his meal, he buries "his chin in a sky-blue cravat secured by two diamond pins linked by a

gold chain" (294). When Emma spurns his sexual advances, despite the array of fabrics with which he is adorned, he takes comfort in "staring at his handsome carpet-slippers," which are a love-gift, deriving a lot of sartorial consolation from contemplating them (295). Thus, Gustave Flaubert tailors for his characters' sexuality the most alluring of outfits as Virginia Woolf dresses the promiscuity of Jinny with translucent and billowing dresses.

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