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The Expressiveness of One's Shell: The Language of Dress in *The Portrait of a Lady*

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To my beloved grandparents, Ughetta and Roberto

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the role of dress as a tool for characterization in Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady*. Previous studies conducted by Hollander (1993) and Hughes (2001) have observed that James cared very little for a detailed, "photographic" description of dress in his fiction. Nevertheless, the limited references to dress in the novel prove that the latter is often aligned with the 'social imagination' of the observer. In the first part, the thesis provides an overview of fashion studies – the psychological, structuralist and sociological perspectives are tackled. The second chapter introduces the subject of the "literary dress" and discusses Henry James's representation of it in his fiction. The final chapter is devoted to reading *The Portrait of a Lady* through these lenses, allowing an understanding of dress as an expression of one's identity and of how the latter is perceived, ultimately stressing the gap between the protagonist Isabel Archer's ideas about dress as a personal 'shell' and her dressing practice.

INTRODUCTION

The main purpose of this thesis is to shed new light on the reading of Henry James's novel *The Portrait of a Lady* through fashion studies theory. Analyzing dress in literature means finding its function as a signifier in the text. The "textualization" of dress does not simply concern description, but it is strictly related to characterization, as an expression of individual identity and/or of social codes.

Studying dress has historically been considered frivolous and unworthy of investigation. This explains why until the beginning of the twentieth century, clothing was generally neglected by literary critics. With the advent of fashion studies, dress became the subject of more serious consideration, also among literary scholars. Groundbreaking works in this regard are Claire Hughes's *Henry James and the Art of Dress* (2001) and Anne Hollander's *Seeing through clothes* (1993). Claire Hughes was one of the first to explore in depth the question of dress in the works of Henry James, whereas the dress historian Anne Hollander studied James's use of dress by dwelling particularly on the influence of dress colour on characterization. Despite acknowledging James's reticence in the description of material things, such as clothing, they stress the intrinsic implications of dress in his literary work.

In *The Portrait of a Lady* dress is often studied in relation to its main character, Isabel Archer. Isabel's relation to dress is very contradictory. On the one hand, she conceives dress as absolutely unrelated to the true self, on the other hand she expresses herself and reads other people *through* dress. This shows a gap between her dressing theory and her dressing practice. James himself echoes the protagonist's ambiguous attitude towards the value of dress: although he avoided detailed descriptions of dress, in a famous late essay on Honoré de Balzac he considered dress as the "most personal shell of all" (1984: 148). Further evidence of this

ambivalence can be found by comparing the 1882 Macmillan Edition of *The Portrait of a Lady* with the 1908 New York Edition. This latter shows a slight but very significant revision, as far as dress description is concerned, in specific paragraphs.

One of the starting points of this thesis was to investigate the reasons that led James to make such revision and the relation it entertains with Isabel's own conception of dress — metaphorized as "shell" by Madame Merle in a central passage of the novel. My thesis is divided into three chapters. The first one attempts to provide a theoretical introduction to fashion studies, and to illustrate how different disciplines have contributed to the exploration of the topic, especially psychology and sociology. Hence, dress will be examined in light of its psychological implications, as a metaphor for language and in relation to identity.

The second chapter offers a general overview to the question of dress in fiction and literature, with specific reference to James and his works. For this purpose, two key figures who shaped his vision will be discussed: the French novelist Honoré de Balzac and the American portrait painter John Singer Sargent.

The final chapter is devoted to the reading of *The Portrait of a Lady.* The chapter explores the peculiar shades of meaning dress has in the novel and their function as a tool for characterization. More specifically, the colors and fabrics of James's characters' clothes will be discussed. Attention will also be given to the differing impressions elicited by Isabel's dress on different characters. Ultimately, the gap between Isabel's ideas about dress as a personal 'shell' and her dressing practice will be examined.

CHAPTER 1

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

1.1 Defining Fashion and Dress

Fashion is not easy to define and there is no universal or widespread understanding of it. As the sociologist Yuniya Kawamura suggests, "there are multiple opinions of fashion" (Kawamura, 2005: 1) and this is due to the fact that fashion consists of multiple aspects: clothing and dress – likewise labelled as "clothing-fashion" (Kawamura, 2005: 2), but also of the very idea of fashion itself. Clothing fashion is used as a synonym of cloth, garment, apparel, that is specifically the material product, while fashion evokes more a symbolic and abstract phenomenon (Kawamura, 2005: 2). Thus, fashion includes two rather opposite categories, which, however, have one permanent element in common – dress. In other words, as Kawamura argues "fashion is associated primarily with dress"(Kawamura, 2005: 4) and this is a fact. Similarly, the philosopher and sociologist Malcom Barnard points out that even when it is not used as synonym of clothing, the term fashion exists in any case within a network of relations with that word (Barnard, 2002: 23). Addressing fashion in a more intangible and abstract level means also to consider it as an added value attached to clothing (Kawamura, 2005: 4). From this view, fashion "is not the visual clothing but is the invisible elements included in clothing" (Kawamura, 2005: 4).

Fashion can thus be understood as material culture, but also as a symbolic system (Kawamura, 2005: 4). Also, Joanne Entwistle tries to formulate a distinction between 'fashion' and 'dress' – she defines dress as "an activity of clothing the body with an aesthetic element (as in 'adornment')", while fashion is "a specific system of dress" (Entwistle: 2000, 48). She argues

that “it is not enough to consider the *physical* production of garments, […] that is to say, we have to look at the meanings and relationships around goods” (Entwistle: 2000, xiv). This means that fashion attributes meaning, discourses and ideas to clothes.

Agnes Rocamora and Anneke Smelik in their Introduction to *Thinking through Fashion* (2019) consider the term fashion in a broader sense, precisely they think of it as an umbrella term which includes “dress, appearance and style” (2019: 2), merging the opposite ends of this continuum into one entity. According to them, the study of fashion must necessarily consider and cover this wide terrain and this shows why today Fashion Studies “has come to refer to the study of fashion in its broad meaning, covering many areas of research across many disciplines, form history (including costume industry), philosophy, sociology, anthropology through cultural studies, women’s studies and media studies” (Rocamora and Smelik, 2019: 2). This definition underlines the interdisciplinary nature of the field.

The reason why fashion needs to be studied through a multidisciplinary approach lies in the fact that fashion is always mediated by different social factors, such as class, gender, ethnicity, age, occupation and body shape. As Entwistle argues, “different situations impose different ways of dressing, sometimes by imposing ‘rules’ or codes of dress or sometimes simply though conventions that most people adhere to most of the time” (Entwistle, 2015: 45). The pressure that these external factors give to the individual activity of clothing proves the complexity of the study of fashion and the impossibility for it to be treated by one specific discipline.

The historian Anne Hollander not only agrees with the symbolic notion of fashion, but also elevates and compares fashion to a form of art: “just as with art, it is in their specific aspect that clothes have their power” (Hollander, 1980: xv). As a matter of fact, she considers the study of fashion and clothing as a pure aesthetic craft (such as pottery and furnishing) as limitative; and she rather treats fashion as a social and psychological phenomena, which have

the power to express emotions, manners and habits (Hollander, 1980: xv). It is impressive that Hollander never adopts the term ‘fashion’ in this respect, even if it seems more apt to her perspective; nevertheless, this choice can be explained by the fact that clothing and fashion cannot be considered as two separate entities, but they are intertwined and mutually dependent and therefore exchangeable.

Also Fred Davis tackled the ambivalent nature of fashion and clothing. In his *Fashion, Culture and Identity* (1993) he argues that ambivalence plays a large role in fashion and he introduces a second semantic difference between the terms clothing and dress:

> *clothing* might reasonably be restricted to the garments themselves, whereas dress could better be made to refer to the distinctive properties of particular assemblages of garments, i.e., the practices and the expectation regarding their combination and waring venues” (Davis, 1993: 26).

He also claims that fashion and clothing have a symbolic realm, however their symbolic meanings tend to be “both more ambiguous and more differentiated that in other expressive realms” (Davis, 1993: 10).

Moreover, fashion can be expanded to a specific ‘system’, found under distinct social, geographical and historical circumstances. This system refers to the production, consumption and organization of dress in a particular society and it is characterized by change. According to Joanne Entwistle fashion in this sense emerged in the fourteenth century in the European courts, specifically in the French court of Louise XIV, in parallel with the rise of the mercantile capitalism (Entwistle, 2015: 44). Similarly, Efrat Tseëlon recognizes the birth of the system of fashion in the fourteenth century, but he also divides the history of fashion into three main phases: classical, modernist and postmodernist. In the classical stage fashion’s attempt was to

maintain social status, while in the other two the relationship between clothes and hierarchy has been challenged (Tseëlon, 2012).

On the other hand, there are many authors who claim that fashion as a system emerged with modernity, for instance, George Simmel sees fashion "as a paradigm of modernity" (Rocamora and Smelik, 2019: 6). In this case the investigation of fashion is conducted also from an economical, industrial and technological point of view. Nevertheless, even if there are different opinions about fashion and its rise, there latter are associated by many theorists with historical moments of change. As Davis argues, "clearly any definition of fashion seeking to grasp what distinguishes it from style, custom, conventional or acceptable dress, or prevalent modes must place its emphasis on the element of change we often associate with the term" (Davis, 1993: 14).

1.2 The Origin of Fashion Studies

Fashion studies as a discipline has a recent origin (Kawamura, 2005: 6). Before becoming a widespread research topic for scholars during the first half of the nineteenth century, fashion was addressed in philosophical and moralistic discussions. In the eighteenth century, fashion was largely associated with upper-classes and luxury (Kawamura, 2005: 7). One of the most critical views about it was elaborated by the French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau in *Discours sur les sciences et les arts* (1750), in which he explained that art had become a symbol of high society and an expression of luxury and vanity. Likewise, fashion was considered as a negative force which masked corruption and immorality: "luxury is such an evil, born, like them, from the idleness and vanity of men. Luxury rarely comes along without the arts and sciences, and they never develop without it" (Rosseau, 1920: 318). According to Rosseau this evil led to the dissolution of morals, therefore a life devoted to arts and luxury was destined to

a degradation of minds (1920: 321). Thus, he despised his contemporaries as they were excessively concerned with the vanities of appearance, while he advocated "a simple and modest attire" (1920: 356). This proves that, at that time, clothes were still considered frivolous, not worthy of consideration, and symbols of a lack of morality (Kawamura, 2005: 7).

On the other hand, French writers such as Honoré de Balzac and Charles Baudelaire were less judgmental or moralistic. For instance, Balzac was a supporter of fashion and regarded it as a serious matter, therefore he devoted many of his writing to this topic. In *Physiologie de la Toilette* (1830), for example, he drew particular attention to men's clothing and argued that the necktie, the way in which it is tied, has the power to define the character of a man (Balzac, 2015: 178). Precisely, he elaborated the concept in *Traité de la vie élégante* (1830) labelled as *vestignomonie*, a pseudoscience similar to physiognomy, which instead of reading the human character through facial expression, read it through clothes (Steele, 2005: 118). Balzac's idea seems to anticipate successive structuralist theories which consider fashion and dress as symbols to be interpreted. In other words, Balzac contributed to the rise of fashion as a serious field of study.

In the same way Charles Baudelaire looked at fashion in a new manner and in his book *The Painter of Modern Life* (1863), in the chapter titled "In Praise of Cosmetics," he developed a sort of metaphysical definition of fashion (Saisselin, 1959: 110):

> fashion must be considered as a symptom of the taste for the ideal which has survived in the human mind above all the rudeness, the earthly, and the ignoble which natural life has accumulated there. It must be regarded as a sublime deformation of nature, or rather as a permanent and successive effort for the reformation of nature (Baudelaire, 1964: 32).

In essence, until the first half of the nineteenth century fashion was ignored by theorists because it was judged as frivolous, trivial and thus as a subject unworthy to be considered seriously; it was associated to 'vanity' and to those 'feminine' foolish and silly topics (Entwistle, 2015: 54). There are a number of contemporary theorists who still devaluate and exclude the study of fashion from the academic field, as Gilles Lipovtesky explains

> the question of fashion is not a fashionable one among intellectuals... Fashion is celebrated in museums, but among serious intellectual preoccupations it has marginal status. It turns up everywhere on the street, in industry, and in the media, but it has virtually no place in the theoretical inquiries of our thinkers. Seen as an ontologically and socially inferior domain, it is unproblematic and undeserving of investigation; seen as a superficial issue, it discourages conceptual approaches (1994: 3–4).

Nevertheless, it is from the last decades of the nineteenth century that fashion began to attract the attention of different theorists operating from different disciplines, such as sociology, psychology, history and cultural studies (Entwistle, 2015: 55).

1.3 Theorizing Fashion and Dress

In order to understand the numerous approaches to fashion, a chronological overview is not enough, but one should rather focus on a few specific questions. The first refers to the reasons why people wear clothes, thus a practical explanation of the factors involved in the act of clothing will be given. Secondly, fashion as a metaphor for language and then the relationship between fashion and identity will be discussed.

1.3.1 Psychological Approach: Why We Wear Clothes

The first who tried to answer to the question of why man wear clothes was the British psychologist John Carl Flügel, who in *The Psychology of Clothes* (1930) offered the hypothesis that "clothes serve three main purposes — decoration, modesty, and protection" (1940: 15). According to Flügel, those are the fundamental motives that led people to adopt clothes: "to cover the body, and thus gratify the impulse to modesty, but, at the same time, they may enhance the beauty of the body" (1940: 20). Moreover, he examined the relationship between the protection of the body from the cold and external elements, the covering of sexual organs for shame and the need to appear sexually attractive to others. He argues that modesty and decoration are opposed one another:

> the essential purpose of decoration is to beautify the bodily appearance, so as to attract the admiring glances of others and fortify one's self-esteem. The essential purpose of modesty is, if not indeed the exact contrary, at least utterly opposed to this. Modesty tends to make us hide such bodily excellencies as we may have and generally refrain from drawing the attention of others to ourselves. Complete simultaneous satisfaction of the two tendencies seems to be a logical impossibility, and the inevitable conflict between them can at best be met by some approximate solution by way of rapid alternation or of compromise — a solution somewhat resembling that which some psychologists have eloquently described under the term *coyness*" (Flügel, 1940: 20).

According to the psychologist, the opposition that characterizes these two needs is the most important subject to be analyzed in the psychology of clothing (Flügel, 1940: 20), since this tension produces a compromise in the individual choice of clothes. Restoring to Freud's psychanalytic approach, Flügel concludes that "the use of clothes, seems, in its psychological aspects, to resemble the process whereby a neurotic symptom is developed" (Flügel, 1940: 21).

This hypothesis finds support in the fact that also neurotic symptoms are consequence of a compromise between the conflicting unconscious impulses (Flügel, 1940: 21).

Also, the psychologist Jacques Lacan provides a convincing reading of Freud, which has been successfully applied to clothes. Like Freud, he focused on the crucial role of looking and argues that a sense of the self and subjectivity is formed through a visual process. More precisely, he developed the concept of the image of the self in the mirror, in which, until the age of six, one does not recognize themselves. Looking at one's self in the mirror either produces a feeling of identification and consequently the formation of identity, or a deep sense of alienation. Furthermore, the gaze also makes aware the gazer of the possibility of being looked at, and this influences the constitution of the identity. Additionally, John Berger (1972) applies this psychological concept to the condition of women - the gaze, which is fundamentally male, creates stereotyped images and identities of women and transforms them into passive objects to be looked at. Needless to say, the lenses of the gazes are oriented towards the physical appearance, the body and inevitably towards clothes.

Going back to Flügel and to his three basic motives of adornment, many later theorists have proved that these latter do not provide an exhaustive answer to the question of why man wear clothes. According to Entwistle, the theory of protection is doubtful simply because not in all cultures people wear clothes, or rather they do not find much protection from clothes. Moreover, also the concept of modesty is problematic since there is no universal notion of decorum (Entwistle, 2015: 57-58).

On the other hand, Roland Barthes, agrees with the utilitarian origin of clothing, but he recognizes also a fourth fundamental function,

> the function of meaning; man has dressed himself in order to carry out a signifying activity. The wearing of an item of clothing is fundamentally an act of meaning that goes beyond modesty, ornamentation and protection. It is an act of signification and therefore a profoundly social act right at the very heart of the dialectic of society (Barthes, 2013: 90-91).

As Entwistle points out, creating meaning through fashion means to communicate with symbols; thus the metaphor of clothes as language hypothesis "has become a dominant theoretical framework" (Entwistle, 2015: 58), accepted by many fashion theorists.

1.3.2 Structuralist Approach: Fashion and Dress as Communication

To tackle fashion as a communicative system has become one of the most accepted theoretical approaches by the majority of contemporary fashion theorists, such as Barnard, Davis and Lurie. This idea was developed by Roland Barthes's, who was the first to bring De Saussure's structuralist approach to the study of fashion.

Alison Lurie's approach is the most problematic and received some criticism (Entwistle 2015; Barnard 2002). In her book titled *The Language of Clothes* (1981) she speaks of a direct analogy between language and clothes, since clothing is "a sign system" (Lurie, 1992: 3). This hypothesis was already anticipated by Barthes in *The Fashion System (1967)*, but here it is taken literally, considering that she believes clothes as the equivalent of words and may be combined into 'sentences' (Barnard, 2002: 46). Then, fashion is actually a language with its vocabulary and grammar; as Lurie argues "we put on clothing for some of the same reasons as we speak" (Lurie, 1992: 27). Although Barnard in *Fashion as Communication* (2002) portrays fashion as a communicative phenomenon, he distances himself from Lurie's approach. He criticizes Lurie for taking the metaphor of clothing being a language too literally, arguing that it

> is a mechanistic view of language and meaning, and it leads to a mechanistic account of meaning in fashion and clothing or as a language, is not unproblematic and should not, perhaps, be pursued too far (Barnard, 2002: 46).

Similarly to Barthes and Lurie, also Fred Davis accepts the "language-like nature of fashion and dress" (Entwistle, 2015: 66), but his hypothesis is that language in fashion is ambiguous and therefore cannot be read as literally as Lurie suggests. Instead, Davis's opinion is that fashion is a code which is very dependent from its context, therefore meaning is not precise, but ambiguous and everchanging. For this reason it is impossible to apply language rules to this type of code (Davis, 1993: 6); Entwistle's remark about Davis's hypothesis of clothes as codes is that "the real power comes from their ability to suggest, evoke and resist fixed meaning" (Entwistle, 2015: 67).

However, the dominant and most accepted framework to address the issue of meaning in fashion, is Roland Barthes' structuralist model, borrowed from the linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure. Structuralism sustains the idea that language is a structure and it is concerned with meaning and how meaning in communication is possible. Saussure proposed in his *Course on General Linguistics* (1916) that the smallest element that carries meaning is sign, which consists of two inseparable elements, a *signifier*, the material aspect of the sign, and a *signified*, the conventional or mental concept associated with it. He also emphasizes the arbitrary relation between signifier and signified, which means that signs have no intrinsic meaning, but gain them through their combination with other signs. While he focused his approach on language, he saw that this notion of arbitrariness in meaning is essential for understanding every system of signs, such as images or piece of clothing. Thus, he expanded this theory to every sign system and developed a 'science of sign', which he labelled semiotics (Entwistle, 2015: 67-67). Barthes, in *The Fashion System*, was the first to apply this structuralist analysis to fashion and to provide a semiotic reading of it (Rocamora and Smelik, 2019: 8). According to Barthes,

there are three ways of defining fashion: the testamentary or the real code, thus, the garment itself; then, the terminological or the spoken code; and the rhetorical code, related to the way in which fashion is translated into words and images ('written clothing' and 'image clothing') (Barthes, 1990: 3). Consequently, he determines that the testamentary code belongs to sociology, while the terminological code is based on linguistics and ultimately, the rhetorical code resides in semiology (Jobling, 2019: 134). A problem concerning the rhetorical code is that there are two levels for reading signs: Barthes labelled 'denotation' the level of the pure act of description of the object, and 'connotation' to refer to the polysemantic interpretation given to the object by the active reader or viewer (Barthes, 1990: 237).

Furthermore, Barthes deals also with Saussurrean concepts of *langue* and *parole*, which are two methods of studying language. *Langue* or language is "the institutional syntax or rules that govern the use of language" (Jobling, 2019: 137), while *parole* or speech refers to "how the individual puts the rules into practice and customizes it" (Jobling, 2019: 134); as Barthes says, "*parole* is the individual act" (Barthes, 2013: 8). Instead, there is a constant exchange between langue and parole and Saussure uses the term *langage* (Barthes, 2013: 8) to refer to it. Barthes finds an analogy in the domain of fashion and he expresses it through the opposition between *dress* and *dressing*. He calls *dress* the conventional and systematic rules of how and when a garment should be worn – which corresponds to the concept of *langue;* while with *dressing* he refers to how individuals can deconstruct these rules, thus, the way in which "the individual actualizes on their body the general inscription of dress" (Barthes, 2013: 8), which corresponds to *parole*. In other words, dressing is the way in which an individual wears clothes, such as the choice of colors and the presence or absence of an item, such as cravat or a button not done up, while dress includes all the fixed, ritualized and stereotyped uses of clothes (Barthes, 2013: 26). Then, what is *langage* to Saussure, is *clothing* to Barthes.

The last relevant Barthes's contribution to mention is the idea of meaning behind clothing, as it seems that the objective, after all, is to discover where meaning can be found:

> the link between dressing and dress is a semantic one: the meaning of a garment increases as we move from dressing to dress. Dressing is a weak form of meaning, it expresses more than it notifies; dress on the contrary is a strong form of meaning, it constitutes an intellectual, notifying relation between a wearer and their group (Barthes, 2013: 10).

According to Barthes it is dress that constitutes a sociological meaning of clothing, not dressing.

Pierre Bourdieu criticizes this structuralist approach since it puts itself at a distance from the real world and tries to provide an objective and fixed meaning to dress. As a matter of fact, one of the main criticisms addressed to Barthes is his conscious decision to focus on "written" fashion texts, such as advertising and photography, which have a different focus in respect to the study of real clothes worn in everyday life. According to Entwistle, the limitation of the analysis of written fashion is that the body presented might be static and far from reality, while clothes in real life take the form of the body and can tell many more aspects than those printed on the page (Entwistle, 2015: 70-71). Along the same line, Kawamura criticizes this language-clothes analogy since it is very limited and cannot broaden the investigation of fashion and dress (Kawamura, 2015: 46). Moreover, as previously mentioned, Davis partially agrees with the structuralist approach of Barthes, since, in his opinion, the meaning of fashion and dress is subjected to change and depends on many factors; hence, fashion does not produce any permanent meaning (Entwistle, 2015: 74).

On the contrary, Barnard takes Barthes's method as a foundation for his study and expands some of his theories. After admitting that fashion and clothing are forms of nonverbal communication (Barnard, 2002: 45), his intent is to locate where meaning is concealed. In the

first place, according to Barnard, there are two possible locations for the generation of meaning: one is outside the garment itself, which can be in the designer's and wearer's intentions, or it can even be established by a political or religious authority; whereas the second meaning is situated inside the garment itself, such as in in the shapes, colors and textures. Barnard remarks that these two kinds of explanations are problematic, firstly because usually their meaning is impossible to separate, then because if it is found only in the garment itself it would be fixed and immutable for everyone (Barnard, 2002: 96). This position is difficult to support since clothes are intrinsically related to a precise society and time. As a consequence, Barnard concludes that the semiotic model "seems more plausible on the matter of how meaning are generated" (Barnard, 2002: 50). Therefore, following Saussure's distinction between signifier and signified in the case of sign, it is plausible to treat garments as signs. More precisely, they can be examined as signifiers, "as standing for or representing something else"(Barnard, 2002: 106). For instance, a man's tie worn not tied can be seen as signifier and it might stand for informality.

Barthes's influence on Barnard's perspective is visible in his detailed study of the notions of denotation and connotation. His contribution to these two levels of meaning in which signifiers and signified work widened the sociologist original theories. Barnard applies these ideas on fashion and finds out three lines of analyses of a garment: the first considers the shapes and patterns of an article as representing elements of it; second, buttons, lapels and patches may refer to a particular style of that garment; then, that article or the whole outfit might be a signifier of a lifestyle (Barnard, 2002: 107). In the first two lines of analysis the denotational meaning is found, while in the last it is the connotational. Denotational meaning refers to the first order of meaning, the literal and factual definition of the garment, for instance, a brown suede fabric and the fringes signify a seventies fringe jacket. While, the second order of signification is called connotation, which refers to personal feelings, thoughts and associations

with a garment. In this case, the subjective character of connotation means that the signified of the signifier may vary from person to person. As a result, it is impossible to mistake in giving a connotative meaning to an object, because it arises different associations, or connotations to different people. In conclusion, denotation and connotation are two different types or levels of meaning (Barnard, 2002: 109-111), which are useful for the study of fashion and clothing.

1.3.3 Sociological Approach: Fashion, Body and Identity

At the turn of the twenty-first century theorists showed the need of a more sociologically-oriented study of fashion (Kawamura, 2005: 20) and shifted away from the dominant framework of semiotics and textuality (Rocamora and Smelik, 2019: 12). This new stance examines fashion not from the viewpoint of human psychology, neither from the idea of a disembodied sign system, but understands dress as "an embodied practice that takes place in a collectively shared social space" (Rocamora and Smelik, 2019: 12). This approach of conceiving dress as practice, embodiment and experience led Rocamora and Smelik to link it to New Materialism (2019: 12). The first theory about materialism was elaborated by Karl Marx, who inspired later Georg Simmel and Walter Benjamin's sociological approaches. Other theorists concerned with the materiality of the human body are Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Pierre Bourdieu. Needless to say, this emphasis on materiality does not preclude a symbolic understanding of fashion, but rather underlines its involvement with individuals' identities.

It is Marxism that inspired a sociological approach concerned with the materiality of things and fashion. This, in turn, prefigured New Materialism and its emphasis on the "very being of objects" (Brown, 2001: 9). Karl Marx in *The Communist Manifesto* (1848) depicted the impact of modernity in terms of social mobility and individual identity as a historical moment of uncertainty derived by the collapse of the *ancien régime* and the rise of the bourgeoise; this

because it was difficult to recognize who was who and this increased the role of dress as a means of expressing and concealing social identity (Sullivan, 2019: 32). The developments emerged with modernity, such as capitalism and industrialization, invoked a dramatic transition in society (Entwistle, 2000: 106). For instance, according to Marx, modernity created a new relationship between individuals and the world of things, which he called "commodity fetishism" (Marx, 1990: 163). In his discussion, he spoke of commodity fetishism as a belief in objects' hidden and mysterious value (Apter, 1991: 1). This mystical character of commodities is a perversion emerged from capitalism, which does not belong the object itself (Miklitsch, 1996: 12), but it is an added value "concealed beneath a material shell" (Marx, 1990: 167); in this respect, fashion is paradigmatic. Tim Dant describes Marx's idea of fetishism as "human relations with material objects" (1996: 496), in which objects acquire human properties. Thus, the fetish quality of an object produces a sort of veneration or worship in human beings to them (Dant, 1996: 499). Then, Dant suggests that

> it is Baudrillard who begins to treat fetishism as a sign of social value; the fetish object is taken to stand for the owner's social status. Here the fetish is no longer an unreal object, believed to have properties it does not really have, but is a means of mediating social value through material culture (1996: 497).

The shell of appearance is a central issue also in Walter Benjamin's thought. Under the influence of Baudelaire, he developed the idea of the *flâneur* (Geczy and Karaminas, 2019: 81). Around this figure he formulated his theory about modernism, which converges in Marx's criticism of commodity fetishism (Lauster, 2007: 140). In short, the *flâneur* is "the viewer who takes pleasure in abandoning himself to the artificial world of high capitalist civilization" (Lauster, 2007: 140), he observes the life of the modern city as a phantasmagoric world of inanimate objects: shops, industries, windows, parks and what people wear (Geczy and Karaminas, 2019: 82). Benjamin described those commodities to possess a life of their own

and to be venerated by human beings (Lauster, 2007: 141). In this respect, it is clearly visible the reference to Marx's fetish commodity. Moreover, the *flâneur*'s experience includes, on the one hand, the delight to observe and to be immersed in the city - the object of observation, and on the other hand, the pleasure of being viewed (Lauster, 2007: 139). According to Benjamin fashion is the very example of fetishism, which shows an oscillation between the organic and the inorganic:

> fashion prescribes the ritual according to which the commodity fetish demands to be worshipped. […] Fashion stands in opposition to the organic. It couples the living body to the inorganic world. To the living, it defends the rights of the corpse. The fetishism that succumbs to the sex appeal of the inorganic is its vital nerve. The cult of the commodity presses such fetishism into its service (Benjamin, 1999: 8).

Thus, fashion being in opposition to the organic becomes the site of the ideal, it is like a "white, flawless, complete, eternal like marble" statue (Barnard, 2020: 38); this statue is the metaphor of the fetishized object, body, garment, or work of art present in the modern city and desired by human beings.

In his essay *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility* Benjamin manifested his preoccupation with the reproduction of art, more precisely photography. The photographed image was able to preserve the past, and this led to its exclusion from the domain of art, since it lost its aura of authenticity (Geczy and Karaminas, 2019: 92). According to Benjamin, this aura is "the here and now of the work of art, its unique existence in a particular place" (2008: 21). In other words, to be a work of art means to be incorporated into a precise context and tradition, otherwise it loses its artistic essence. On the contrary, in the latter part of the essay, Benjamin suggested that the process of production and reproduction invests the objects – most notably fashion, with a new power, which enables a connection between the

human subject and the material object through desire (Ekardt, 2020: 79); we can therefore argue that also Benjamin underlined this fetish desire for the inanimate perfection, the endless return of the same, as central concern in modern life.

Along with Marx, Georg Simmel emphasized that objects are "valuable within a social relationship" (Brown, 2015: 285). This is particularly relevant to the field of fashion, as Simmel's analysis highlights the "essentially social nature of dress" (Entwistle: 2015, 114). As a matter of fact, he tried to understand the relationships between people and products in modern society, which is fundamentally contradictory. Actually, modernity opens new possibilities for individualization, which were not possible in rural communities, but at the same time, it closes these opportunities for the sake of social cohesion. Thus, the contradiction of modern life is a simultaneous tendency toward generalization, uniformity and differentiation. Simmel argued that it is possible to see this contradiction in the field of fashion, which articulates itself between conformity and differentiation: individuals, in fact, desire both to affirm their individuality and to conform socially through clothes (McNeil, 2015: 71). Simmel was the first to introduce this fashion paradox, this opposing tendency to conform and to express individuality. Moreover, he explained that

> the fact that fashion expresses and at the same time emphasizes the tendency towards equalization and individualization, and the desire for imitation and conspicuousness, perhaps explains why it is that women, broadly speaking, are it staunchest adherents […]. The relation and the weakness of her social position, to which woman has been doomed during the far greater portion of history, however, explains her strict regard for custom, for the generally accepted and approved forms of life, for all that is proper […]. But resting on the firm foundation of custom, of what is generally accepted, woman strives anxiously for all the relative individualization and personal conspicuousness that remains (Simmel, 1957: 550).

Simmel put to light the fact that fashion was particularly significant to women because it was their 'voice', their means to express themselves (McNeil, 2015: 74-75). Thus, as women were culturally invisible, fashion was the "compensation for their lack of position" (Kawamura, 2005: 9) in society. On the other hand, in the nineteenth century dress became the manifestation of class and women became vehicle of display of the wealth of the male, which means that men exhibited their social status through the appearance of their wife and daughters. This practice of differentiating social class through the ladies' clothing has been explained by Thorstein Veblen in his *Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899). He argued that women were the property of their men, therefore, together with the other possessed commodities, they represented men's wealth. Thus, fashion, being one the most visible displayer of social status, was intended for women as a form of "vicarious consumption" (Veblen, 2007: 49). Upper middle-class wives were required to consume goods (such as clothing, food, furniture etc.) "on behalf" of their husbands in order to help these latter show their social status and wealth. Therefore, wives and daughters became vehicles of this vicarious display. As Veblen stated:

> it has in the course of economic development become the office of the woman to consume vicariously for the head of the household; and her apparel is contrived with this object in view. It has come about that obviously productive labour is in a peculiar degree derogatory to respectable women, and therefore special pains should be taken in the construction of women's dress, to impress upon the beholder the fact (often indeed a fiction) that the wearer does not and can not habitually engage in useful work. […] Her sphere is within the household, which she should "beautify," and of which she should be the "chief ornament." […] The high heel, the skirt, the impracticable bonnet, the corset, and the general disregard of the wearer's comfort which is an obvious feature of all civilised women's apparel, are so many items of evidence to the effect that in the modern civilised scheme of life the woman is still, in theory, the economic dependent of the man, — that, perhaps in a highly idealised sense, she still is the man's chattel (Veblen, 2007: 118-120).

Fashion was not only a woman's affair, but actually Simmel also emphasized that more than a gendered activity, it was primarily the displayer of social status: "the fashions of the upper stratum of society are never identical with those of the lower; in fact, they are abandoned by the formers as soon as the latter prepares to appropriate them" (Simmel, 1957: 543). This shows that elite classes attempted to differentiate themselves from the lower through clothes.

However, as Simmel argued, the paradox of modernity not only implies an effort to conform socially, but also a concern for self-representation. Thus, modernity reinforced the link between body, dress, class and identity and in this context conscious self-fashioning became significant also for men (Entwistle, 2015: 124-125). Although according to Simmel the relationship between style and class is mostly addressed to women, the role of fashion in the never-ending process of social integration and social differentiation was relevant in the nineteenth century also to men; the figure of the dandy is emblematic (Spence Smith, 1974: 726). More precisely, in the realm of fashion, "dandyism in anti-fashion" (Geczy and Karaminas, 2019: 85), the term antifashion consists of dressing opposite to the fashion of the present. Indeed, the dandy tries to differentiate himself through a highly self-consciousness on style (Geczy and Karaminas, 2019: 85). He represents the possibility in modernity to self-create one's appearance and overcome the need to conform socially.

Instead, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Pierre Bourdieu's sociological focus on "a paradigm of embodiment" (Entwistle, 2015: 28) suggests a shift of perspective in fashion theory.

Merleau-Ponty' phenomenology of the embodied experience of the world recognizes the primary role of the body in engaging with the external reality. According to him, the body does not exist separately from the mind, but rather it is the medium through which human beings feel to be part of the world. Thus, it is through their corporeal existence and their physical engagement that they interact with the world and build their points of view (Negrin, 2019: 116-

117). He argued that "the body is not an object in the world but our means of communication with it. It is the horizon latent in all our experience and itself ever-present and anterior to every determining thought" (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 91-92). Hence, the experience of the world depends on the relationship of the body with it. He further pointed out that the body not only enables the interaction with the environment, but also with other people. This means that the body also has a social nature, through which people understand themselves. What is relevant in his discussion is that the body and the physical environment are in a mutual determination since individuals' presence in the world is not merely passive. In effect, they do not simply absorb cultural codes, but they actively engage and shape them. In conceiving the body as an active corporeal experience, Merleau-Ponty overcome the structuralist approach involved in textuality and shifted the emphasis on materiality (Negrin, 2019: 119-2021). As Entwistle argued, "structuralism offers the potential to understand the body as a *socially constituted and situated object*, while phenomenology offers the potential to understand dress as an *embodied experience*" (Entwistle, 2015: 12). She applied this phenomenology to the analysis of the "corporeal experience of dress" (Negrin, 2019: 122): "a sociological perspective on dress requires moving away from the consideration of dress as object to looking instead at the way in which dress is an embodied activity and one that is embedded within social relations" (Entwistle, 2015: 10).

She proposed the idea of dress as a situated bodily practice in order to understand the relationship between body, dress and culture. This framework sees bodies as situated in society and culture, but also as the outcome of individual practices (Entwistle, 2015: 11). Likewise, dress, being the extension of the body, is the result of socially determined practices performed by individuals (Negrin, 2019: 122) affected by their intentions. Thus, according to Entwistle, dress, being the visible aspect of body, is the "vehicle of being" (2015: 29) in the world. By focusing on women's corporeal experience of dress she demonstrated that "the gendered nature

of the body of the wearer impacts on the clothing that is worn" (Negrin, 2019: 124). As a matter of fact, the body, having its own materiality, influences the way in which clothes are experienced by the wearer and by people around them (Negrin, 2019: 124).

In dealing with fashion as "inextricably linked with the body" (Negrin, 2019: 115), Pierre Bourdieu offered another useful sociological account of the idea of embodiment, focusing on dress as a "situated bodily practice" (Entwistle, 2015: 37). This idea brings to light the structure versus agency dichotomy (Rocamora, 2019: 243) and develops the hypothesis of a mutual relationship between these two, which Bourdieu reduced to the notion of the *habitus* (Entwistle, 2015: 36). According to him, the *habitus* is "a system of durable, transportable dispositions" that are produced by the particular conditions of class grouping (1994: 95), moreover, it is "a set of dispositions which incline agents to act and to react in certain ways" (1991: 12). Thus, the *habitus* links individual forces to the social structure (Entwistle, 2015: 36).

The concept of disposition is central: it is embedded in the body, but it is the result of social forces. Dispositions, in fact, are sedimented in the body through social interactions within a social group. This means that the way people live in their bodies depends on and is structured by their social position in the world – for Bourdieu, class position (Entwistle, 2015: 36). Nevertheless, it true that the *habitus* "is inhabited by an active human agent who is defined the system, but, crucially, is merely its passive object. The agent engages on exchanges of symbolic power with other agents" (Joseph, 2020: 116). This active role of the individual allows a sense of agency. Furthermore, Bourdieu argued that taste is the visual manifestation of dispositions – hence the *habitus*, is taste, since "it is a highly embodied experience" (Entwistle, 2015: 36) and marker of class.

As Entwistle underlined, Bourdieu's concept of *habitus,* in combining individual and social forces, provides a middle way between agency and structure, which is highly useful for the study of dress:

> the notion of the *habitus* as a durable and transposable set of dispositions… enables us to talk about dress as a personal attempt to orientate ourselves to particular circumstances and thus recognizes the structuring influences of the social world on the one hand and the agency of individuals who make choices as to what to wear on the other (Entwistle, 2015: 37).

This means that people's decisions about how to dress rely upon a mixture of personal choices and social constraints (Barnard, 2020: 362). The study of dress, as a situated bodily practice, puts itself into a complex framework; it includes the basic garment provided by the fashion system and an individual adaptation of it based on the context of the experience of the body, such as class, gender, age and so on. Thus, the bodily practice of dress produces a negotiation between the structured social system and the individual agency built on a set of dispositions. In a nutshell, the concept of *habitus* in the realm of dress, produces a negotiation between the individual body and the social group; but it also enables to see dress as an individual cluster of choices and dispositions which help the individual to engage with the world (Entwistle, 2015: 37).

CHAPTER 2

FASHION IN THE FICTION OF HENRY JAMES

2.1 Fashion and Fiction

The analysis of fashion in fiction implies a multiplicity of levels of investigation: from the aesthetical, to the psychological, sociological and philosophical. More precisely, it is the analysis of *dress* among the material world of things in literary texts, which requires this plurality of levels since it is deeply involved with human body and life. Moreover, dress communicates more subtly than other commodities and objects (Wilson, 2003: vii) and for this same reason, the "literary dress can be deceptively multifaceted" (Kuhn and Carlson, 2007: 2).

In the essay *Fashion in 20th-Century literature* (2017), Cristina Giorcelli reflects on the relationship between fashion and literature, which leads her to one fundamental question: "what is the relationship between textile and text?" (2017: 1). She notices that "apparel and written language, garments and written words" (2017: 2) are closely linked even though it does not seem so. Indeed, by sharing the same etymological root, text and textiles both rely upon materiality and on their use by people (2017: 2). However, until the second half of the nineteenth century, this link has been underestimated and devaluated. As previously pointed out, clothes were mainly regarded as frivolous matters and as means of vanity, thus there existed a widespread mistrust of dress-related concerns. This explains why dress was not covered at length in literature (Giorcelli, 2017: 3-4). Nevertheless, some authors such as Jane Austen, Charlotte Bronte, William Thackeray and Elizabeth Gaskell, understood beforehand the communicative potential of dress. It is especially during the second half of the nineteenth century that authors began to treat this topic increasingly more seriously; to name but a few:

George Eliot, Gustave Flaubert and Theodore Dreiser (Giorcelli, 2017: 10). However, it is only from the advent of fashion studies that clothing, in its specificity, has been used by literary critics as possible lens of observation (Kuhn and Carlson, 2007: 3). Surprisingly, only few literary critics paid attention to this matter until the beginning of the twentieth century. Virginia Woolf herself argued in *A Room of One's Own* (1929) that the topics of fashion and dress were still unworthy to be handled, since it "is the masculine values that prevail. Speaking crudely, football and sport are 'important'; the worship of fashion, the buying of clothes 'trivial'" (1987: 70). Therefore, dress was not critically analyzed yet. Hughes recognizes Aileen Ribeiro and Anne Hollander as the very first dress historian to tackle this topic in the realm of fiction with more consideration and to open the path for new critical readings (2006: 5).

An exhaustive answer to the question above has been provided by Claire Hughes in her *Dressed in Fiction* (2006), who explained that references to dress in a text contribute to the "reality effect" (2006: 3) for both reader and writer: "they lend tangibility and visibility to character and context". Following this line of thought, Elizabeth Wilson argues that dress is not only an object, but also an image (Wilson, 2003: vii) and McNeil Peter sees dress as a kind of fiction, since it "functions as narration and expression of the self" (2009: xv). Thus, dress has to do with characterization since it contributes to the construction of the image of the self in the text. Likewise, McNeil notes this complex relationship between character and dress, which can be perceived as "one of the narrative devices in fiction" (2009: 5). Hence, character's dresses are often more expressive than their spoken words and this proves that dress is "codified or endowed with meaning" (McNeil, 2009: 5). Thus, descriptions on dress help us define our visons of the fictional world, but, on the other hand, Claire Hughes regards that excessive consideration and information about dress is "felt to be distracting, even suspect" (2006:1). In this respect, for instance, George Eliot attributed the failure of her novel *Romola* (1862) to an excess of descriptions of this kind, as she said:

> It is the habit of my imagination to strive after as full a vision of the medium in which a character moves as of the character itself. […T]he reason why my tendency to excess in this effort after artistic vision makes the impression of a fault (1998: 350).

Already tackled was the perception of dress both as a visible record of history and, on the other side, as a specific social code or a language. Although, dress does not simply follow these widely shared structures in the realm of fiction, but it "can also operate as the author's personal sign-system, conscious or unconscious" (Hughes, 2006: 3). This is what makes fiction so fascinating: "readers read on numerous levels and learn about the multifaceted world of the author through multiplying layers or meaning" (McNeil, 2009: 5) and dress is one of them.

At the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, dress received increasing consideration by authors and became "part of a symbolic pattern" (Hughes, 2006:3). Evidence of this can be found in literature by Modernist authors such as Thomas Hardy, Virginia Woolf and Henry James, who place the consciousness of characters at the centre of their narrative and explore what "is like to wear, to observe, to 'undergo' dress" (Hughes, 2016: 8). In his *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891), Thomas Hardy attentively specified the heroine's dress color and texture (Hughes, 2006: 3) in order to represent her developments as a woman, hence, "dress is an important element in Hardy's demonstration of this idea" (Gatrel, 2006: 147). In turn, in the 1928 novel *Orlando* by Virginia Woolf, the function of dress was to challenge gender boundaries and represent the protagonist's changing perceptions (Hughes, 2006: 8). Similarly, Henry James considered dress as the "most personal shell of all" (1984: 148) in terms of the expressiveness of one's identity. Hughes ultimately defines that these authors were moving in the direction of "a 'poetics' of dress" (2006: 8) because their depiction of characters involved their own personal experience of their dress and of those of the others (2006:9).

Considering that many literary authors have made powerful use of it, the deployment of dress "as symbol, image, motif or metaphor" (Kuhn and Carlson, 2007: 2) is worth being investigated. In addition to this, the dress historian Aileen Ribeiro points out in her important study *Fashion and Fiction: Dress in Art and Literature in Stuart England* (2005), that "literature conveys emotions and feelings about clothes that can highlight character and further the plot of a paly or a novel […]. Fashion itself can be said to produce fiction" (2005: 1). Dress and fashion both perform a narrative function just as literature does (Hollander, 1980: xv).

Subsequently, Peter McNeil argues that an important function of the novel was to formulate and express "dominant nineteenth-century bourgeois social values and attitudes" (2009:130). In this respect, dress was one of the most evident indicators of social status and this is also why it became one of the core subjects of the novel (2009: 11). As a result, dress does not only function as a tool for characterization, but also as a means of enhancing social, political and aesthetical issues. Thus, the dressed body is included in those infinite number of codes present in literary texts. Similarly, Khun and Carlson suggest that "the written clothed body […] [is] a narrative element with multiple dimensions [and] can contribute to a significantly deeper understanding of texts, their contexts, and their innovations – even challenging, in some cases, traditional readings (2007: 1-3). For instance, Tamara S. Wagner in *Respectably Dressed, or Dressed for Respect: Moral Economies in the Novels of Victorian Women Writers* (2007) challenges the literary use of women's dresses as pure indicator of wealth and respectability. She rather argues that there is a tension between women's accuracy in dressing and the economic value that they represent through their clothes. She then explains that this tension in nineteenth-century literature became one of the key themes of the novel (2007: 3).

Hughes argues that "clothes in fiction are […] rarely described in full" (2006: 3) rather, they are often simplified and modelled within the framework (2006: 3). It may also happen that

some novels show an historical confusion or inaccuracy about dress since not all novelists were concerned with this matter. Ultimately, she points out that "an absence of dress references can also be significant" (2006:4) in novels. Indeed, in the works of Thomas Hardy and Henry James limited room is devoted to dress-descriptions. This underlines that dress in fiction does not necessarily have to do with the practice of description, rather, according to Hughes, it is "crucial to the construction of an imagined world, as well as an integral part of the way a novel is constructed as an artwork, part of the novelist's modernist concern with the life of the mind" (2006: 3).

Another consideration of dress concerns its 'figurative' status within the narrative, which constructs a visual image in the mind of the reader through the use of words. In other words, narration has a figurative power, which ascribes the narrated dress a visual charge. Peculiar of dress is its proximity and adherence to the body, figuratively shaping it. Furthermore, dress entails a broader and more complex spectrum of affective, social and political implications of the object. Being the author aware of the use of dress as a medium to his narration, several understandings open up. This demonstrates the interaction between fashion and literature, which deploys the lens of fashion as literary element in the writing process (Lippolis, 2020: 354 – 356).

Indeed, the analysis of fashion within the domain of literature "can illuminate the structure of the text, its values, its meanings or its symbolic patterns" (Hughes, 2016: 6). Ultimately, it is fundamental to bear in mind that dress does not carry one single meaning (Hughes, 2016: 4), but can rather be dangerously mutable since it has the "ability to arouse passions, to seduce, disturb, deceive and to threaten even the wearer […] - all adds to the power of dress for the written fiction" (Hughes, 2016: 2).

2.2 Henry James and the Art of Dress

In James's 1868 short story *A Romance of Certain Old Clothes* "a set of haunted clothes avenge their dead owner" (Hughes, 1997: 67). The significant role dress plays in his early writing suggests that James devoted attention to it since the very beginning of his career. Nevertheless, this was underestimated by critics until the end of the twentieth century. So far, the most detailed and exhaustive critical reading of dress in Henry James's literary work is Claire Hughes's monograph *Henry James and the Art of Dress* (2001), which opened up to new reading horizons in his work.

Before her, the influential dress historian Anne Hollander in *Seeing through Clothes* (1993) drew attention to dress in James by arguing that the writer is "aware of the importance that qualities of clothing have in the area of sensibility, but he hangs back from indications of specific style" (1993: 424). Despite the occasional references to dress, James's concern about clothing comes from his own "very deep acknowledgment of the power of clothing, of its much greater importance than that of other inanimate objects" (Hollander, 1993: 424). Hollander also pointed out that James's "reticence in the verbal consideration of clothing" (Hollander, 1993: 424) may be understood as a form of break up with the traditional novelistic depiction of the subject. As a matter of fact, common consideration of fashion appears to be "confined entirely to extraneous detail – ribbons, ruffles, patterns – unfocused finery to convey the notion of frivolity" (Hollander, 1993: 424) of some characters. In other words, meticulous dwell on dress aims to stress the superficiality and lack of moralistic concerns in characters.

Given James's peculiar interest in visual arts and his acute artistic sensibility – as tackled by scholars such as Adeline Tintner and Viola Hopkins Winner (Hughes, 2001: 2) - it seems legitimate to draw a parallelism between clothing and human subjectivity in his literature. Both critics underlined James's concern with point of view and visual experience either ways in his

life and in his fiction; Hopkins Winner argued that "so integrally related were his visual responses and creative impulse that an understating of his mode of vision will certainly deepen an understanding of his theory and practice of fiction" (1993: vii). Similarly, Tintner pointed out "James's visual appetite for object and artefacts of great beauty, with great cultural saturation" (1986: 4). Hence, any aesthetic artefact is adapted to the novel as narrative device and holds an allegoric meaning.

Hughes affirmed that James's use of dress was always economical in his fiction, but his role as theme and symbol increased during his career: dress shifted from a pictorial description to a "more compressed and dramatic symbolism" (Hughes, 2001: 4). Rather than a mere placement of "characters in a precise historical and social frame", dress covers a deeper task in James's novel, becoming emblematic for characters' identity. Evidence that dress was important to James can also be found in his critical *oeuvre*. Hughes outlines James's awareness of the relevance of dress in art. Still, she also argues that the author avoids putting too much emphasis on the subject's exteriority, which may undermine his intrinsic "value". This tells precisely how he employed fashion in his fictional world, devoting little words to dress descriptions. Thus, the presence of dress in paintings, theatre and fiction, is far from being self-referential, but has rather "to be seen as instrument towards the revelation of moral meaning" (Hughes, 2001: 9). In a nutshell, James was highly aware of the damaging effect of redundant details on dress, but he was also firmly convinced of "their ability to evoke powerful emotions, to permeate their immediate circumstances as well as to remain in memory" (Hughes, 2001: 9).

James's recognized master Honoré de Balzac considered fashion a serious matter and a powerful emblematic tool in literature (Hughes, 2001: 2). In his critical writings, James pointed out that in Balzac's *Eugenié Grandet* the author gives crucial information about the protagonist's features and dress. This choice is justified by James

> because these things are all described only in so far as they bear upon the action, and not in the least for themselves. If you resolve to describe a thing, you cannot describe it too carefully. But as the soul of a novel is its action, you should only describe those things which are accessory to action (1984: 606).

Admittedly, the lesson of Balzac led James to take this position: on the one hand, he provided economical descriptions of material objects, which, on the other hand, proved as a functional presence to the meaning-making process of the text, and on the other hand, it is justified the presence and consideration of material objects.

2.3 Honoré de Balzac and John Singer Sargent's Lessons on Dress

Balzac was prized by James as "the master of us [novelists] all" (1984: 138), and differently from other literary critics, who 'simply' addressed him a realist writer, he meant to James way more: he was the predecessor, who mostly taught him what it meant to be a novelist and to write fiction (Gervais, 2004: 317). In Gervais's notes, "Balzac stood for James as an archetype of the artist in general: indefatigable, self-forgetting, lost in his creations to the point where the real and the imaginary became one" (2004: 321). James, especially appreciated Balzac's ability to enter into his characters, as he explained in a paragraph taken from his *The Lessons of Balzac*:

> he at all events robustly loved the sense of another explored, assumed, assimilated identity – enjoyed it as the hand enjoys the glove when the glove ideally fits. […] what he liked was absolutely to get into the constituted consciousness, into all the clothes, gloves and whatever else, into the very skin and bones, of the habited, featured, colored, articulated form of life that he desired to present (James, 1984: 132).

This passage is relevant firstly because it emphasizes Balzac's ability to connect his imagination to reality. Allegedly, his characters are extremely plausible, real and definite because of his "marvelous" (Colton, 2020: 53) imagination. James acknowledged Balzac's ability to fuse invention with realism and for this reason he addressed to the novelist the epithet of "realistic romancer" (Colton, 2020: 49). He believed that Balzac was "both a realist and a romancer, a writer who immersed himself in data but transformed facts into symbols and characters into universal types" (Daugherty, 1980: 20). Balzac's strength mirrors therefore in his ability to grasp real facts through the brightness of his imagination and to merge these opposite forces into his characters (Daugherty, 1980: 21). The real and the imaginary are thus part of a single continuum. James recognizes in Balzac's literary work an attempt to translate his ideas into palpable figures. As James wrote in *The Lessons of Balzac*,

> every mark and sign, outward and inward, that they possess; every virtue and every vice, every strength and every weakness, every passion and every habit, the sound of their voices, the expression of their eyes, the tricks of feature and limb, the buttons on their clothes, the food on their plates, the money in their pockets, the furniture in their houses, the secrets in their breasts, are all things that interest, that concern, that command him, and that have, for the picture, significance, relation and value (James, 1984: 128)

This passage also synthetizes what James himself tried to achieve in his fiction, as he fused his careful observation of reality with the symbolic value he attributed to characters and settings (Daugherty, 1980: 23).

The second reason why the first passage is relevant is because it outlines James's comment on Balzac's use of dress; it seems that James was explaining Balzac's theory of *vestignomonie,* which shows the link between consciousness and clothes, expounded also by Balzac himself in his *Traité de la vie élégante* (1833). The author considered fashion as "the manifestation of

thoughts in outward appearances" (1938: 161). Thus, the power of dress lays in its potential to display one's consciousness and represent its wearer, just as if the belongings and items were an imprint of the person (Hughes, 2001: 50). In the previously mentioned essay, James commented on Balzac's use of dress in *César Birtotteau* (1837). Particularly relevant is what James says about the image of the 'shell':

> the shell and its lining is […] the most personal shell of all, the significant dress of the individual, whether man or a woman. […] Dress, […] could still give him [César] opportunities of choice, still help him to define and to intensify, or peculiarly to place his apparitions (1984: 148).

Henry James was obsessed about portraits and in his 1893 essay on the painter John Singer Sargent he wrote: "there is no greater work of art than a great portrait" (1989: 227). This statement is particularly relevant since James, as an artist, was more concerned with the representation of human consciousness rather than his materiality (Bernard Yeazell, 2017: 309). Especially Sargent's portraits were praised the most and likely find an echo in his fiction. This is because, as James explained, Sargent's main goal was to convey an impression rather than a photographic image (Bernard Yeazell, 2017: 317), which was the same intention of the writer. As evidenced in James's essay *The Art of Fiction* (1884), "a novel is in its broadest definition a personal impression of life" (1884: 60). Portraits are lifelike, because they are free from the artifice of plot, which James labelled in his Preface to *The Portrait of a Lady* as "nefarious" (1984: 42). The plot is nefarious because it limits the artist's and protagonist's movements of imagination. In the same way a great portrait "conveys the effect of a human presence without subjecting it to such restrictions" (Bernard Yeazell, 2017: 318). Hence, James compares his representation of consciousness to an art which depicts appearances because,

visual experience overlaps with inner reality (1884: 66). This clarifies James's analogy between painting and literature. The novelist,

> is here that he competes with his brother the painter, in his attempt to render the look of things, the look that conveys their meaning, to catch the colour, the relief, the expression, the surface, the substance of the human spectacle" (1884: 66-67).

According to James, what appears to the eye hides moral meaning, and this is the reason why he appreciated so much Sargent's works. In his own words, "the quality in the light of which the artist sees deep into his subject, undergoes it, absorbs it, discovers it in new things, that were not in the surface" (Sweeney, 1989: 228). James saw this quality in the portrait of *The Daughters of Edward Darley Boit* (1882):

> it is a scene, a comprehensive impression; yet none the less do the little figures in their white pianafores (when was the pianafore ever painted with that power and made so poetic?) detach themselves and live with a personal life (Sweeney, 1989: 222-223).

Allusion to dress highlights how this gains symbolical value by illuminating the inner life of the little wearers. Significantly, this description supports Hollander's hypothesis that James's use of dress was inspired by Sargent's pictorial one: "well-chosen and well-placed fitful gleams with a very precise personal flavor, thrown up against a more generally suggestive and atmospheric background" (Hollander, 1980: 431). The striking precision in the rendering of dress leverages the principle that the right cloth alone is a mirror to the self (Gervais, 2000: 103). This involved especially Sargent's women portraits, in which he drew particular attention to dress in order to "explore the ambiguities of their roles as both symbols of their husband's wealth and power and personalities in their own right, conscious even of the possibilities available to them as modern women" (Bell, 61).

CHAPTER 3

THE LANGUAGE OF DRESS IN *THE PORTRAIT OF A LADY*

In spite of being rarely used, in *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881) dress appears as one of the most symbolic devices in the hands of the narrator. As Hughes remarked, in fact, “although there are comparatively a few scenes […] in which dress is dealt with at any length, their frequency is not an index of their importance” (2001: 47). Furthermore, Tintner pointed out “clothes as a part of the iconography of *The Portrait of a Lady* are far from surface decorations, they are integral to the novel” (1986: 146).

Therefore, this chapter explores in depth dress as a tool for characterization in *The Portrait of a Lady*. The significance of colours chosen by James for his characters will be investigated. Thus, wearing black and white has significative implications for their characterization. In this regard it will be remarked that there are many shades of black and that each of them might convey a different meaning; for instance, there are several reasons behind the choice of a black dress, which are necessarily related to mourning. However, the language of the dress is not only determined by the dress itself, its colour, details or fabric, but most importantly, by the eye of the beholder. The character's point of view on the observed object, in this case the dress, is therefore crucial in the impression-making. The appearance of Isabel in a black velvet dress, for instance, will be shown to be interpreted by two characters in a very divergent manner.

It is fundamental to bear in mind that dress does not only reveal one’s identity, but also hides one’s true self. Hence, characters such as Mrs. Touchett, consciously dress to hide their identity or to be inscrutable. Similarly, the dress and, more generally, the outward appearance of a

person can be misinterpreted by the observer, as occurs to Isabel in the case of her husband Osmond. This complex and debated relationship between identity and dress is introduced by the narrator in Chapter 19 with the famous conversation between Isabel and Madame Merle. This relevant theme will be discussed at the end of this chapter. Furthermore, James's vision of the relation between consciousness, body and dress – exemplified by the characterization of Isabel – will be tackled. Finally, echoes of the philosophy of William James and Maurice Merleau-Ponty will be illuminated in *The Portrait of a Lady*.

3.1 Chiaroscuro impression

Isabel's first appearance in the novel sees her from afar as a "tall girl in a black dress, […] bareheaded, as she were staying in the house" (James, 1984: 69) passing thorough the doorway of Gardencourt and approaching the garden. The description is economical, James simply registers the color of the dress and the social implication of not wearing a hat (Hughes, 2001: 48). Later in Chapter 21, Isabel appears in the garden "in a white dress ornamented with black ribbons" allowing her to "[create] among the flickering shadows a graceful and harmonious image" (James, 1984: 153). However, except for that moment, Isabel will mostly appear in black or dark dresses. Parallel to this, the character of Pansy, Gilbert Osmond's daughter, is mainly depicted in white clothes and only occasionally in blue and black ones (Hughes, 2001: 45), which further emphasizes the darkness aligned to Isabel.

James's choice to use black throughout the novel is primarily explained by the fact that Isabel is in mourning for her father, then for her uncle Mr. Touchett, later for her lost pregnancy and in the end for her cousin Ralph Touchett. Nevertheless, this choice of colour avoids any simplistic association between black and mourning and, thus, needs further analysis. Firstly, Isabel is not the only character among James's heroines to appear in black. An instance is the

protagonist of *The Wings of the Dove* (1902) Milly Theale, who also wears black and shares a similar life-background with Isabel – she is an orphan and arrives in Europe bereaved. Black dresses also recall the figure of Minny Temple, who inspired many of James's heroines. She was friend with the author and died in 1870 at twenty-four, before she could make her trip to Europe. Like Isabel and Milly, Minny Temple was an orphan and at the time James knew her, she was always wearing black.

Hughes points out that James's use of dress in this context is accurate both socially and historically (Hughes, 1997: 66) – she explained that "mourning for a parent in the 1870s [when the novel was set] required nine months in black, three months in half-mourning, and Isabel's dresses conform to these demands" (2001: 48). The same attention can be seen in Pansy's white association, since "white is the formal wear for unmarried girls" (Hughes, 2001: 47). However, this understanding of James's use of dress is likely to be too limited and simplistic. Hughes, for instance, addresses this transition from black to white, and back to black again as "a reminder of the melodramatic trope, to which the novel partially conforms" (2001: 47). This remark echoes the logic of the "excluded middle" featured in melodrama elaborated by Peter Brook in *The Melodramatic Imagination* (1995: 36). This logic implies the exclusion of middle sates, which is mirrored in the omission of different colour-shades, in favor of a constant conflict between extreme poles: black and white. Thus, the melodramatic trope is staged as a struggle between opposing and uttermost states of being and actions (Brooks, 1995: 11). According to Brooks, in James's novels the melodramatic trope lies not only externally between actions and between characters, but also in the inner self. Brooks argues that this inward conflict, known as "melodrama of consciousness" (1995: 157), was adopted by James during Isabel's "extraordinary meditative vigil" (James, 1984: 54) in which the "polar concepts of darkness and light, salvation and damnation" (1995: xiii) are revealed in her strong emotional

state. Consequently, one possible reading of this game between light and dark, which flows into a chiaroscuro-effect, denotes the melodramatic pattern of the novel according to Brooks.

3.2 ‘Sober’ and ‘Emotional’ Black and Isabel’s Evening Dress

The study of Hollander on the expressiveness of black in the history of dress highlights the complexity behind the symbolic value of the black dress in James’s fiction. She distinguished two varieties of black according to the different meaning they communicate: the ‘sober’ black and the ‘emotional’ black. In the 19th century, this colour became omnipresent in fashion, thus acquiring multiple meanings depending on by whom and how it was worn (Huhges, 2001: 48). For instance, black did not only appear in mourning, but also in men’s outfits. At first it was established as an anti-fashion “dandy mode” (Hollander, 1980: 376), while later it became fashionable and conventional. Nevertheless, women also adopted black dresses with the intent of exhibiting their originality, non-conformism and rebellion against social codes. Hence, “to isolate and distinguish” (Hollander, 1980: 377) themselves from social expectations.

In this regard, according to Hollander, it is worth mentioning a second feature of the female black dress, which was elaborated during Romanticism: black appears as the color of the devil and forbidden practices (1980: 376). Thus, a woman wearing a black dress could only involve satanic allusions and erotic overtones (Hollander, 1980: 377). These above-mentioned connotations are identified by Hollander under the label of ‘emotional’ black: the “dramatic, isolating and distinguishing black” (1980: 377), which indicates the “antifashion, rebellious tradition which seeks to isolate and distinguish the wearer” (1980: 377).

On the other hand, the dress historian describes the ‘sober’ black as “the conventionally sober, self-denying black” (1980: 377). In a nutshell, sober black is the conventional colour worn by

upper-class women, who did not want to show off or tell something about themselves through their dress. These studies tackle the multifaceted meanings that black dresses carry, still, they fail examining the gap between what one intends to convey by wearing black and what other people perceive.

James's exploration of the implications carried by dressing in black does not start nor end with Isabel Archer and Milly Theale. Rather, this was illustrated also in *The Story of a Masterpiece* (1868) and in *Professor Fargo* (1874). In the first short story the protagonist is a young woman, who commissions with her fiancé a portrait of herself. The artist asks her to wear black, and the couple do not complain since they believe the colour emphasizes the lady's youthful fairness. However, the finished work does not stress her candour, but ultimately reveals her moral darkness. Indeed, since the painter had known her in the past as a heartless person, he willingly addresses black a different meaning and displays her through his eyes. Again, it is possible to draw back to Hollander's distinction between 'sober' and 'emotional' black: on the one hand, the girl and her fiancé attribute to this colour a positive connotation, while the artist, on the contrary, ascribes to it a dramatic value.

In the second mentioned short story, instead, the black dress worn by Miss Gifford gains a positive value and represents "her father's respectability and integrity" (Hughes, 2001: 49). Both stories outline James's early awareness of the nuances and meanings of wearing black. Thus, by the time he arrives to Isabel's novel, he has already played with a multitude of complex possibilities (Hughes, 2001: 50).

James's few descriptions of dress often lead to a misunderstanding of Isabel's subjectivity. Easier is the task when it comes to grasp the impressions of the other characters as they see Isabel dressed in black.

According to Hughes, in James "the symbolism of dress is at its most telling on ceremonial occasions, such as balls and evening-parties" (2001: 54). Emblem of this hypothesis is Pansy, who wears a blue dress at an evening party and for this reason is noticed by Lord Warburton and Rosier. The reason why these last two characters spot her is because for the first time she is not wearing white, which in the past made her look as an innocent and naïve girl subserved to her father. On the contrary, at the evening party, her blue dress depicts her as a separate entity from her father and reveals her subjectivity.

The same argument may be applied to Isabel's black velvet dress. Still, more is to be remarked on this. To begin, it is worth to underline that Isabel's dress conveys a different effect on different characters, which implies that the meaning of this garment lays on the eye of the beholder. More precisely, Isabel's look is registered in completely distinctive ways by two characters, who have a different relationship with her: Ralph Touchett and Rosier. On the one hand, even if Rosier knows Isabel since their childhood, now he sees her as Pansy's stepmother, which changes his perspective on her. As supported by his words, "she was dressed in black velvet; she looked high and splendid, […] framed in the gilded doorway, she struck our young man as the picture of a gracious lady" (James, 1980: 418). Thanks to his artistic eye, Rosier is able to note the detail of the velvet fabric and recognizes that it is appropriate for a lady. Thus, he "focuses on the lady-like quality of the effect she creates" (Hughes, 2001: 55). To be a 'Lady' is translated in the text in the practice of wearing rich fabrics like black velvet and Isabel, in this way, uses it just like a disguise to play her role. However, being a lady comes at cost to Isabel because it means sacrificing her own identity. Drawing back to the above quoted

analysis of black by Hollander, Rosier's understanding of Isabel's black is parallel to Hollander's reading of 'sober' black as a conventional and resigned colour. Not only, Isabel's appearance from the doorway with her black velvet dress is "a brilliant *coup de théâtre* in the ballroom" (Hollander, 1980: 377). Hollander stresses the emotional effect that Isabel elicits by wearing a black dress. In her quotation, we read a clear reference to the 'emotional black', which constitutes the "original antifashion, rebellious tradition, which seeks to isolate and distinguish the wearer" (Hollander, 1980: 377).

However, according to Hughes, Isabel's black dress does not highlight her personal quality in this scene, but her husband's. It is Ralph that "spots" Osmond in that dress and is horrified by this vision (2001: 55):

> poor human-hearted Isabel, what perversity had bitten her? Her light step drew a mass of drapery behind it; her intelligent head sustained a majesty of ornament. The free, keen girl had become quite another person; what he saw was the fine lady who was supposed to represent something. What did Isabel represent? Ralph asked himself; and he could only answer by saying that she represented Gilbert Osmond (James, 1980: 444).

Instead of focusing on the fabric of Isabel's dress, Ralph is attentive to another detail: the long train, which "weights portentously upon her [as] a heavy burden upon her head" (Hughes, 2001: 51-55). This ornament speaks more about Osmond than Isabel because it displays his social status as a distinguished gentleman – a common practice at the end of the nineteenth century, as Veblen pointed out (Hughes, 2001: 55).

Lastly, but not the least, another reason behind Isabel's choice of wearing black is, in fact, that she is going through a mourning because she has lost her newborn child. However, the reader has no possibility to enter in her consciousness and feel her sorrow. Even if it is easily

predictable, this is never explicitly described by James. Summarizing, the use of black conceals different meanings: class-adaptation, social dissent and mourning.

3.3 Mourning Clothes and Individual Inscrutability

The idea that Isabel's black dresses blur her identity (Hughes, 2001: 50) is shared by Shari Goldberg, who in her essay *Henry James's Black Dresses: Mourning without Grief* (2018) remarks that James's black dresses "circulate as details that announce their wearer's emotional inscrutability" (Goldberg, 2018: 526). Evidence of this is her exploration of James's representation of mourning, in which she distinguished between mourning meant as "the social acts that indicate the event of death" (2018: 516), and grief as "the painful emotions ensuing from loss" (2018: 516). This distinction is peculiar, since classical theories of mourning presuppose the terms *mourning* and *grief* to be interchangeable.

James adopted the term "mourning" (1984: 262) in *The Portrait of a Lady* and as well as in his literary works to refer to the conventional costume, which is different form the emotional personal experience of bereavement (2018: 517). Actually, James's characters "said to be in mourning rarely express the pain of loss. In most cases, James does not delve into their mental and emotional responses to death" (Goldberg, 2018: 517). On the other hand, in describing the pain of loss James does not allude to the term mourning. According to James, mourning not only differs from grief, but referred to a set of practices, of which the black dress was the most emblematic (Goldberg, 2018: 518). Instance of this in *The Portrait of a Lady* is Isabel's description as pallid and serious after her uncle's death and this impression is not conveyed by her black dress: "the girl was pale and grave—an effect not mitigated by her deeper mourning" (James, 1984: 261). In other words, this reference to mourning entails the physical experience of wearing a black dress and does not allude to Isabel's sorrow.

Goldberg's thesis is thus that James' mourning refers to the description of a character's appearance, more precisely he provides sartorial information, which is not related to the personal experience of loss. In a nutshell, mourning evokes etiquette rituals and not individual emotions.

Although in James's work "certain conclusions about the characters may be drawn from their described outfits" (Goldberg, 2018: 525), Isabel's black dresses do not communicate specific personal features; indeed, rather than being expressive of what they show, they are meaningful for what they conceal (Goldberg, 2018: 518). Therefore, the conventional feature of black clothes masks the character's personal feelings or true self. In this respect, Goldberg's observation might shed a further light on Isabel's argument during her famous conversation with Madame Merle: "nothing that belongs to me is any measure for me; everything's on the contrary a limit, a barrier, and a perfectly arbitrary one. Certainly the clothes which […] I choose to wear, don't express me; and heaven forbid they should!" (James, 1984: 253). This limit and barrier may be interpreted as Isabel's intent in preventing her interlocutor and reader from knowing her; in this way, rather than expressing, black dresses conceal, instead of saying something, they grant obscurity to their wearer (Goldberg, 2018: 526). The arbitrariness which Isabel highlights may refer to a choice of not being a straightforward and clear person. From in this perspective, then, James's choice of black clothes for Isabel seems a direct representation of her impenetrability: neither the author nor the protagonist, seem to want to present Isabel as she really is. Rather they block and obscure her emotional insight with this dress. However, this obscurity lets everyone read Isabel's image in their own way and risk misinterpreting her.

After the death of Mr. Touchett, in Chapter 19 Isabel leaves off her white dress and returns to wear her black one, as the etiquette manuals suggest. Nevertheless, she also finds herself with

an inherited fortune, and from that moment on “the question of how she now sees herself, and therefore how she expresses herself to other, becomes critical” (Hughes 2001: 50). It is critical because, as already mentioned, Isabel rejects that her personal self is related with her “shell” and “personal appurtenances” (James, 1980: 253). Instead, this is precisely what Madame Merle believes: “I know a large part of myself in the clothes I choose to wear. I’ve a great respect for things! One’s self – for other people – is one’s expression of one’s self” (James, 1980: 253). Thus, according to Madame Merle, clothes and all things one possesses, are highly expressive of the self.

However, “having denied that any material object can be expression of her ‘self’, Isabel fails to take into account that the wealth she has inherited – invisible but certain material – might define her image for others” (Hughes, 2001: 51) One of these others is Gilbert Osmond, who, along with Madame Merle, sees in that black dress a fortune. However, Osmond is not only concerned with Isabel’s money, but he wants also to transform her into his ideal woman, after the likeness of his daughter Pansy (Hughes, 2001: 51).

3.4 Misreading Pansy’s and Osmond’s Appearances

Pansy is seen in the novel from her sixteenth to her twenties, but instead of registering her psychological and physical growth, James portrayed her as a static figure, locked in her childhood. In fact, almost every passage about her in the text refers to her littleness and youthfulness (Hughes, 2001: 51) and her white clothes; she is dressed in a “scant white dress” (James, 1980: 304) with her “small shoes” (304), then as “the little girl […] in her prim white dress” (306), or her gown was “too short for her years” (280). Thus, Pansy’s white clothes are appropriate for her age, but they give her a childish air and “they seem designed to impede the growth and movement appropriate to her youth” (Hughes, 2001: 52). While Isabel’s white dress

at the beginning underlines her American freedom and brightness, now with Pansy, "it is turned into a caricature of youthfulness" (Hughes, 2001: 52). Only two times Pansy breaks the rule of wearing white and these moments are significant since she appears as a mature and determined young woman: the first is in Chapter 37, when at the evening party Rosier and she, declare love to each other; and the other is when she is seen by Lord Warburton for the first time: "that young lady in the blue dress. She has a charming face" (James, 1908: 436). These are the only moments of Pansy's self-expression, in which she is presented as a young woman independent from her father.

Hughes notices that although Isabel and Pansy wear opposite colours - black and white – they are not in conflict with each other. They act as the mirror of each other, reflecting their past and their future. Pansy reminds of Isabel's past, a motherless young girl with an eccentric father, but she also represents Isabel's future: a submissive woman, impeded from being herself, trapped and at the service of her husband (Hughes, 2001: 52). Even if it is clear to the reader that Pansy prefigures Isabel's future, Isabel misreads Pansy's appearance – "the white flower of cultivated sweetness" (James, 1980: 366) – and leads her to change in order to please her husband Osmond.

Not only is Isabel unable to understand Pansy's situation, but she also misreads Osmond. The source of this error may be found in the strong argument expressed by Madame Merle: material things express the self. Allegedly, it is precisely because of this belief that Isabel's life precipitates to a deep unhappiness – which not only it "blinds her to the way others may see her", but it also "worst of all leads her to read positive qualities into the mere absence of 'things' in others" (Hughes, 2001: 53). Actually, when the narrator introduces Osmond by writing that "he was dressed as a man dresses who takes little other trouble about it than to have no vulgar things" (James, 1980: 280), this indifference towards clothes reflects Osmond's "aesthetic of

negation" (Hughes, 2001: 54), or, according to Ascari, aesthetic of immobility (2006: 42). Madame Merle's description of Osmond also evokes this pattern: "no career, no name, no position, no fortune, no past, no future, no anything" (James, 1980: 249). However, this absence is far from revealing Osmond's nature, rather it "is a mask, which happens to correspond to Isabel's romantic aspirations" (Ascari, 2006: 43) and conceals his insensitive, egocentric and manipulative nature. Isabel tragically mistakes this negation for "unconventionality, sensitivity and intellectual freedom" (Hughes, 2001: 54). She characterizes him for what he is not – the "anti-type of manhood" (Person, 2003: 94) with "no property, no title, no honours, no houses, nor lands, nor position, nor reputation, nor brilliant belongings of any sort. It is the total absence of all these things […] that pleases me. Mr. Osmond is simply a man - he is not a proprietor!" (James, 1980: 398). Needless to say, while Isabel misreads Osmond, the latter "does establish a proprietary interest in her" (Person, 2003: 94).

Moreover, Hughes remarks that Osmond's absent traits may be read also as a version of dandyism (2001: 53). This is also agreed by Ascari, who similarly argues that Osmond, being an antithesis of the classical notion of masculinity "represents a version of the Victorian dandy" (2006: 93). Evidence of this is George Brummel's reflection, according to which one of the fundamental principles of dandyism was "to avoid anything marked […]. Long hours of concentration and preparation, of finicky attention to detail, were required to produce its [effect of] dignified simplicity" (Moers, 1960: 34-35). In accordance with Balzac's *Treatise on the Elegant Life,* Osmond is the opposite of elegance, since elegance is "the manifestation of thoughts in outward appearance" while dandyism is simply an "affectation of fashion […] in becoming a dandy, a man becomes a piece of boudoir furniture" (Balzac, 1938: 161-163). Thus, the dandy – Osmond – not only proclaims fashion for fashion's sake and excludes feelings and thoughts, but he also conforms to the aesthetic doctrine "to make one's life a work of art"

(James, 1980: 358). Furthermore, Osmond applies this principle to both his wife Isabel and his daughter Pansy and conceives them pieces of furniture for his palace.

Additionally, Osmond's profession is to perform the gentleman (Person, 2003: 93), and through this performance he manages to hide his intentions and his search for superiority (Hughes, 2001: 53). According to Balzac, in the *Elegant Life*, there is no superiority between people, everyone treats people with equal respect, whereas Osmond's intention is instead to become an icon of power (Ascari, 2006: 45) and therefore treats his women as subjects. Hence, we can argue that, thanks to his aesthetic of negation and his gentleman-hood, Osmond is able to blur his real identity and to deceive everyone, especially Isabel:

> I had no prospects, I was poor, and I was not a man of genius. I had no talents even; I took my measure early in life. I was simply the most fastidious young gentleman living. There were two or three people in the world I envied—the Emperor of Russia, for instance, and the Sultan of Turkey! There were even moments when I envied the Pope of Rome—for the consideration he enjoys. I should have been delighted to be considered to that extent; but since that couldn't be I didn't care for anything less […]. The leanest gentleman can always consider himself, and fortunately I was, though lean, a gentleman (James, 1980: 315).

Hughes rightly clarifies that it is not Osmond who deceives Isabel, but "she deceives herself by misreading him, and deceives him into misreading her" (2001, 54):

> if she had not deceived him in intention she understood how completely she must have done so in fact. She had effaced herself when he first knew her; she had made herself small, pretending there was less of her than there really was" (James, 1980: 475).

We can therefore conclude that it is Isabel that made herself a version of Pansy, "misleading Osmond into seeing her as another black surface. Black and white are both denying colours; Isabel and Pansy are the two sides of Osmond's valueless coin" (Hughes, 2001: 54).

3.5 The Angel of Disdain and the Angel of Death

Isabel’s switching between black and white dresses continues throughout the novel and Hughes analyzed Isabel’s outward image in relation to her *self*. Isabel surprisingly changes her clothes from black to white after her moment of recognition in Chapter 42. She now wears a “white cloak which covered her to her feet, she might have represented the Angel of Disdain, first cousin to that of pity” (James, 1980: 530). Now, after her “motionless seeing” (James, 1984: 54), tha she can see properly Osmond and all the people around her, she is in white and resembles an angel with large wings (Hughes, 2001: 58). The resumption of white gives Isabel a new, never-seen look, which is the result of this moment of psychological lucidity and evokes her true personality. Thus, the white dress echoes her restored identity: she has regained her self-awareness and independence and highlights her disdain and pity for her husband. Instance of this are two episodes in which Isabel rebels against Osmond: first, when she assumes the role of Pansy’s guardian (Hughes, 2001: 58) and disagrees with Osmond’s plan to arrange the marriage between Pansy and Lord Warburton. These unprecedented resoluteness and determination are a reminder of early at Gardencourt, wearing her bright ideas and independence. Thus, the white cloak represents this reconquered brightness and acquired maturity.

The following stage of Isabel’s development is seen when she disobeys Osmond’s prohibition to go to England to visit her dying cousin Ralph. She confronts him with her new attitude, accuses his malignant nature and takes the first train to Gardencourt; thus, she managed to resist Osmond and to “assert her physical and moral independence” (Hughes, 2001: 59).

Once arrived in England, she becomes “Ralph’s black angel of death” (Hughes, 2001: 59): she is all in black again and assumes this “positive role which combines her love for Ralph with a hard-worn sense of freedom” (Hughes, 2001: 59). As previously argued, Isabel’s appearance

produces different effects on different observers. Indeed, the black dress she wears when she is in England, creates a remarkable impression on Mrs. Touchett, who observes:

> ‘That is a very odd dress to travel in’, Isabel glanced at her garment. ‘I left Rome at an hour’s notice; I took the first that came’. ‘Your sisters in America, wished to know how you dress […] they seemed to have the right idea: that you never wear anything less than a black brocade’ (James, 1980: 616).

The strong commitment of Mrs. Touchett and Isabel's sisters on matters of etiquette and the correct use of clothing according to different occasions is evident here, since this “seemed to be their principal interest” (James, 1980: 616). Her sisters are more concerned with Isabel’s clothes than with her tragic marriage situation, as they believe that she should ensure a “sign of wealth and respectability” through her appearance. However, they failed to understand that her choice of black has nothing to do with this issue and this can be proved by Isabel’s words, when she says that she chooses her dress casually.

Thus, one possible reading of Isabel’s black dress is that it symbolizes her unhappiness, but at the same time “it is a positive expression of herself by material means, independent of what others have tried to make of her” (Hughes, 2001: 59). If Osmond tried to close Isabel into those conventional and self-denying black dresses, her use of this colour is “a clear denial of showiness as well as an isolating and distinguishing sign” (Hughes, 2001: 59).

Her last appearance in black may be seen as a reinforcement of her new attitude. As Hughes remarks, “the dress may seem the same but its meaning has changed” (2001: 60). That is not the same black as the beginning, which evoked her energetic optimism and freedom. Now, after her experience of suffering, she frees herself from her role as a commodity:

> she casts off her mask and recovers a serenity that has become hers by virtue of an act of self-conscious renunciation, an act that rises her above the sorts of exchange to which she is, in form, submitting by her marriage to Osmond (Agnew, 1983: 86).

3.6 Resistant surfaces: Mrs. Touchett and Madame Merle

Hughes points out that "*The Portrait of a Lady* is concerned with suggesting the truths and realities that hide beneath surface appearances" (2001: 60). In this respect, the figures of Mrs. Touchett and Madame Merle seem to be resistant walls that avoid revealing their inner self.

Isabel always associates Mrs. Touchett's figure with her "comprehensive waterproof mantle" (James, 1980: 79). According to Hughes, the mantel has a symbolic meaning within the novel and it represents the "apparent impermeability" (2001: 60) of its wearer. She has a tight nature, above all, in the realm of human relationships. Isabel, in fact, starts to perceive this after Mr. Touchett's death. Mrs. Touchett's dry and distancing approach seems thus to protect herself against external situations and to hide her emotions (Hughes, 2001: 60). Besides mentioning the mantel twice ("in a well- worn waterproof" (1980: 82) and "she sat in her damp waterproof" (1980: 272)), Isabel understands that her aunt adopts this mantel in order to hide her true character. However, at the death of her son, her impenetrable surface collapses and her vulnerability comes out. Indeed, Isabel notices that she is not wearing the mantle anymore, but a "little grey dress of the most undercoated fashion" (James, 1980: 615). Later, niece and aunt embrace and the latter expresses starkly her "grief and loneliness" (Hughes, 2001: 61). Isabel thus understands "her aunt not to be so dry as she appeared, and her old pity for the poor woman's inexpressiveness, her want of regret, of disappointment, came back to her" (James, 1980: 616). As Hughes points out, "for Isabel this garment becomes symptomatic of her aunt's difficulties with the life of emotions. Isabel's own developing awareness and maturity – about

herself and others – enable her to read beneath Mrs. Touchett's resistant and indeterminate surface" (2001: 61). Needless to say, James adopts this waterproof mantle as a mask, protecting the wearer from external circumstances and concealing deeper feelings, nevertheless, Isabel's acquired maturity allows her to read beneath these appearances.

Likewise, the same applies for Madame Merle: she uses her appearance to hide her secrets. The first time she was seen by Isabel, she was admired by her for her elegance, "perfect proportion and harmony" (James, 1980: 228). As Hughes remarks, "there appears to be no irregularity or weakness on this perfectly spherical, polished surface, no place where insight might find some purchase" (2001: 61). Isabel, in fact, describes her being "too perfectly the social animal that man and woman are supposed to have been intended to be" (James, 1980: 244). Her appearance thus represents both physical and moral perfection. Isabel believes that her beauty can be associated only with her emotional purity, as she says: "a charming surface doesn't necessarily prove one superficial; […] Madame Merle was not superficial – not she. She was deep" (James, 1980: 244). Even Ralph Touchett, although using an ironic tone, confirms Isabel's impression of Madame Merle: "she is too good, too kind, too clever, too learned, too accomplished, too everything. She's too complete, in a word" (James, 1980: 301).

James provides only one description of Madame Merle's dress, when she is at Gardencourt shortly before Mr. Touchett's death (Hughes, 2001: 61): "fastening a bracelet, dressed in dark blue satin, which exposed a white bosom that was ineffectually covered by a curious silver necklace" (James, 1980: 230). The necklace's description as "a sort of corselet of silver" (James, 1980: 452) as well as the figure of Madame Merle defined as "armed at all points; it was a pleasure to see a character so completely equipped for the social battle" (James, 1980: 451) suggest an impression of Madame Merle as a military figure (Hughes, 2001: 61). According to Hughes, this armour and the silver corselet protect Madame Merle from revealing

her deepest secrets, from her adultery and illegitimate child to the more recent betrayal of Isabel's affection (2001: 61-62).

It may therefore be concluded that, these two characters exploit their appearance as a barrier, unlike Isabel who is "vulnerable to interpretation and manipulation by others" (Hughes, 2001: 62). Mrs. Touchett's impermeability and Madame Merle's elegance are their fortifications, which conceal their true nature. But it is thanks to these figures, that Isabel discovers a "stronger defense against the betrayals of the heart and […] rejects those strategies of concealment" (Hughes, 2001: 62) and in fact the narrator remarks that "there was no use pretending, wearing a mask or a dress" (James, 1984: 475).

3.7 Isabel's Embodied Consciousness in Pansy's Ripped Dress

In the Preface to *The Portrait of a Lady* James announced that his choice was "to place the centre of the subject in the young woman's own consciousness" (James, 1984: 50). According to this assumption, one might think that he thus "cares little for bodies" (Blackwood, 2010: 271) and surfaces. Moreover, this view presumes that there is a separation between consciousness and corporeality (Blackwood, 2010: 271). Nevertheless, in her essay *Isabel Archer's Body*, Blackwood proves that James's representation of Isabel's consciousness is by no means independent from her body (2010: 271).

Blackwood's hypothesis is sustained by the fact that in the period between the novel's first publication and its revision, many psychologists "offered a new consideration of the mind […] as a physiological structure, embodied material" (2010: 272). The novel, according to Blackwood, explores this new theory by focusing on Isabel's relationship between her mind and her body; and she assumed that James conferred a key role to this theory. Thus, her reading

of 1908 New York Edition of *The Portrait of a Lady* is based on conceiving Isabel's "consciousness as corporeal" (2010: 2727), which is explored through the appearances and gestures of her body. Moreover, this understanding of the corporeal consciousness opens up the opportunity to feminist studies to deepen the relation between the self and the sexed and gendered body.

Evidence of this Blackwood's assumption is found at the beginning of the novel, when Ralph and Lord Warburton's impressions of Isabel at Gardencourt are conveyed in terms of her bodily presence: "[Ralph's] attention was called to her by the conduct of his dog, who had suddenly darted forward, with a little volley of shrill barks (James, 1984: 69). Then, Isabel "stopped and caught [the dog] in her hands, holding him face to face while he continued his joyous demonstration" (James, 1984:69). Similarly, Lord Warburton observes Isabel's gestures and bodily movements as evidence of her free and independent nature. He notes that she is "the independent young lady" everyone is talking about, and he recognized her "from the way in which she handles the dog (James, 1984: 69). Afterwards in the same chapter, a direct connection emerges between her mind and her body: "her head was erect, her eye brilliant, her flexible figure turned itself lightly this way and that, in sympathy with the alertness with which she evidently caught impressions" (James, 1984: 72). However, through Isabel's body it is possible to perceive not only her freedom, but also her negative feelings. For instance, after Lord Warburton's proposal, her disapproval is firstly expressed through her bodily actions, and in fact her first reaction is to stand up: "Isabel had got up; she felt a wish, for the moment, that he should not sit down beside her (James, 1984: 155) and then she proposes to take a walk. According to Blackwood, "it seems, in these moments, that Isabel's bodily agitation reflects her mental agitation and is somehow an *expression of* a prior metaphysical emotional state" (2010: 275). Furthermore, Blackwood not only understands the remarkable role that Isabel's body plays in expressing her emotions and thoughts, but she also recognized that her body

effectively becomes a form of thought itself (2010: 275). Her movements seem to anticipate her feelings, in fact, during the exchange with Lord Warburton, she instinctively sands up and this movement causes her a sense of anxiety (Blackwood, 2010: 275). Likewise, this happens in one of the novel most famous moment, when Isabel detects Osmond and Madame Merle's unexpected position:

> she stopped short, the reason for her doing so being that she had received an impression. […] She felt it as something new. […] Madame Merle was standing on the rug, a little way from the fire; Osmond was in a deep chair, leaning back and looking at her. […] What struck Isabel first was that he was sitting while Madame Merle stood; there was an anomaly in this that arrested her. Then she perceived. […] Their relative positions, their absorbed mutual gaze, stuck her as something detected (James, 1984: 458).

Isabel first stops and then perceives; this is quite unusual, since it is alleged that human beings first feel sensations and then their bodies experience and express that feeling. Here, however, James echoes William James's theory on the relationship between emotions and their physical expressions (Blackwood, 2010: 275). This theory appeared in the 1884 essay *What is an Emotion?*, in which William wrote that human beings first experience a bodily movement and then feel in accordance with that movement (James, 1884: 190). He thus believed that our emotions are effects of our bodily movements. Nevertheless, this scene not only resonates James's brother's theory, but also represents Osmond and Madame Merle's secret in a "physical" manner, allowing Isabel to see it. Through this pose, which represents a violation of social custom, Isabel realizes that the two share an unusual and unexpected intimacy. We can therefore conclude that their body language is the manifestation of their embodied consciousness.

However, "Isabel's body becomes less responsive as the novel progresses" (Blackwood, 2010: 276). According to Blackwood, there are two reasons behind this change. First, the premature death of her son causes a terrible psychological and bodily experience; secondly, Isabel's body is manipulated by Osmond. Recalling what was previously mentioned, after three years of marriage, Isabel is seen by Rosier as a proper lady: "she was dressed in black velvet; she looked high and splendid, […] framed in the gilded doorway, she struck our young man as the picture of a gracious lady" (James, 1984: 418), with "a mass of drapery behind it" (James, 1984: 444). Ralph has a similar impression but charged with tragedy. Thus, her body becomes mute and unexpressive as the novel progresses – it "is likewise muted though fabric, pose and ornament" (Blackwood: 2010: 276). Another manifestation of Isabel's silenced body and loss of expressiveness is noticed by Ralph: "there was something fixed and mechanical in the serenity painted upon [her face]; this was not an expression, Ralph said – it was a representation" (James, 1984: 443). Her face is more a representation of Osmond than of Isabel's thoughts and feelings. Ralph thus notices the lack of correspondence between her outward appearance and her identity. In other words, "Isabel's 'fixed and mechanical' aspect signals a breakdown of the organic relationship between body and mind" (Blackwood, 2010: 276).

Although Isabel is entrapped in a body which no longer reflects her subjectivity, in Chapter 43 James provides a new physical space for her consciousness: Pansy's dress. They are at the ball and Pansy's dress has been ripped while dancing:

> Pansy came back to Isabel with another rent in her skirt, which was the inevitable consequence of the first and which she displayed to Isabel with serious eyes. There were too many gentlemen in uniform; they wore those dreadful spurs, which were fatal to the dresses of little maids. It hereupon became apparent that the resources of women are innumerable. Isabel devoted herself to Pansy's desecrated drapery; she fumbled for a pin and repaired the injury; she smiled and listened to her account of her adventures. Her attention, her sympathy were immediate and

> active; and they were in direct proportion to a sentiment with which they were in no way connected-a lively conjecture as to whether Lord Warburton might be trying to make love to her. It was not simply his words just then; it was others as well; it was the reference and the continuity. This was what she thought about while she pinned up Pansy's dress (James, 1984: 489).

Isabel's body is working to repair the tear in Pansy's dress, while her mind wanders into entirely different thoughts. In truth, according to Blackwood, "Isabel's body's labor is, in fact, integrally related to her mind's. Pansy's dress, like Isabel's inner life, is in disrepair because of the violence and carelessness of men" (Blackwood, 2010: 227). Men thus are destructive to women's minds as well as to their dresses. While Isabel repairs the tear of the dress, at the same time her body "works to repair the damage done to her own mind [and] her corporeal self works to restore the tears sustained by her consciousness" (Blackwood, 2020: 277).

3.8 *The Portrait of a Lady* and James's Phenomenology of Dress

I will now discuss James's understanding of the relationship between consciousness, body and dress, by restoring to the theory expounded by his brother William James and Merleau-Ponty's philosophy. Although Isabel is perceived by others as a corporeal self, which is related to her body and material objects she possess, her view of her own mind and body falls in line with the Emersonian belief of independence and self-reliance.

According to Merle A. Williams in *Henry James and the Philosophical Novel: Being and Seeing*, James's art of fiction is guided by a phenomenological approach (2009: 2) since he

is deeply concerned with the exploration of man's immediate experience; through reflection and careful description, [James] aims to arrive at a deeper understanding of the fundamental patterns of human existence" (2009: 2).

The phenomenological approach considers the phenomena of perception and interpretation of human actions and objects of physical reality as interrelated. In a nutshell, it concerns "the interaction between consciousness and its object" (Williams, 2009:3), which could also correspond to one's own body and garments. In this respect, Williams draws a parallel between the work of Henry James with Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological thinking. In his Preface to the *Phenomenology of Perception,* Merleau-Ponty argues that man is "a subject destined to the world" (1962: xi) and that "the world is not what I think, but what I live through" (1962: xvi-xvii). This explains why Merleau-Ponty considers the individual as an embodied consciousness, which is located in a specific spatiality and is defined by the relationship between mind and body (Williams, 2009: 4). This idea is applied also to the individual's understanding of his or her surroundings. James proved in his writings that "perception is inherently perspectival" (Williams, 2009: 4), thus any situation or object is perceived by a specific point of view. In fact, according to Merleau-Ponty, the interpretation of the world depends on the way in which the embodied subject interacts with it. Similarly, James attempted to portrait the social reality through the circumstances of the individual case (Williams, 2009: 4-5); and in *The Portrait of a Lady* he tried to illustrate what it means to be a 'lady' through the psychological and embodied experience of Isabel. Thus, from these considerations we can presume that James's phenomenological investigation of Isabel echoes Merleau-Ponty's approach.

Moreover, Merle Williams besides noticing that William James's philosophy and Henry James's novels have something in common, he also pointed out that "William James's

treatment of the relationship between the consciousness and body" (2009: 14) converges with Merleau-Ponty's approach. Evidence of this convergence is William James's understanding of the individual as an embodied consciousness, who experiences the world through his corporeality. In his argument, William James also argued that "each person has a variety of 'social selves', which are shaped in response to the expectations of the various groups within which he moves" (Williams, 2009: 14).

The theories of Merleau-Ponty and William James are also useful to the investigation of dress in *The Portrait of a Lady*.

Isabel is presented from the very beginning of the novel as an independent young lady and she regards "the world as a place of brightness, of free expansion, of irresistible action" (James, 1984: 104). She has "an immense curiosity about life" and is "constantly staring and wondering" (James, 1984: 80). Isabel, is thus "the perfect embodiment of freedom in the eagerness with which she opens herself to the possibilities" (Armstrong, 1983: 116). However, her imagination and hopes are naïve and dangerous because they do not consider the limits posed by her circumstances. This absolute understanding of freedom leads Isabel to believe that limits only mean oppression and tyranny (Armstrong, 1983: 117). Thus, she identifies her independence with self-expression and freedom from those limits. Furthermore, she confesses also that her clothes are a barrier – in the famous exchange about personal appearances with Madame Merle in Chapter 19. Madame Merle, instead, by echoing Balzac's theory of `vestignomonie' (Hughes, 2001: 50) – that everything we own represents ourselves and our selves can be read through the clothes we choose to wear – remarks:

> you will see that every human being has his shell, and that you must take the shell into account. By the shell I mean the whole envelope of circumstances. There is no such thing as an isolated man or woman; we are each of us made up of a cluster of appurtenances. What do you call

> one's self? Where does it begin? Where does it end? It overflows into everything that belongs to us—and then it flows back again. I know that a large part of myself is in the dresses I choose to wear. I have a great respect for *things!* One's self—for other people—is one's expression of one's self; and one's house, one's clothes, the book one reads, the company one keeps—these things are all expressive (James, 1984: 253).

And Isabel replies:

> I think just the other way. I don't know whether I succeed in expressing myself, but I know that nothing else expresses me. Nothing that belongs to me is any measure of me; everything's on the contrary a limit, a barrier, and a perfectly arbitrary one. Certainly the clothes which, as you say, I choose to wear, don't express me; and heaven forbid they should! […] My clothes may express the dressmaker, but they don't express me. To begin with it's not my choice that I wear them; they're imposed upon me by society." (James, 1984: 253).

Here Isabel reminds us of Emerson's transcendentalism, especially as she defines herself as an autonomous individual independent of social circumstances. Evidence of this can be found in Emerson's words taken from his *The Transcendentalist* (1842) - "you think me the child of my circumstances. I make my circumstances" (Gorra, 2012: 148) – which according to Miacheal Gorra, they correspond to Isabel point of view. Thus, Isabel perceives herself as a 'disembodied subjectivity', in which her consciousness is separated from her corporeality and external materiality.

On the contrary, Madame Merle's argument opens up a number of interpretations. Firstly, her belief that the self is determined by the external world and the things one possesses express the self, recalls Balzac's theory. She has, indeed, a great respect for things and the material reality. Moreover, the self, being inseparable from the outside world, is conceived not only as mind,

but also as corporeality; this idea evokes Merleau-Ponty's embodied consciousness and explains why Madame Merle recognizes herself in her clothes.

Henry James tried to challenge Isabel's theory by portraying her dresses as representative of her identity, especially this is evident when he described the heavy "mass of drapery" (1980: 444) attached to Isabel's dress. In this case, the dress speaks highly of her and this follows Merleau-Ponty's and Balzac's approach.

Moreover, Isabel is mistaken in believing that clothes are just boundaries imposed by society. Madame Merle, in contrast, proves that "all expression depends to some degree on conventionally established means of expression—like, say, language" (Armstrong, 1983: 120). Thus, Madame Merle does not reject conventions, but she accepts them and manipulate them to confer her own meaning. This idea is shared by structuralist theorists, since they confirm that we live in an "arbitrary system of signs (or *langue*), but the individual is free to apply and to shape this system in an individual and personal way. So, he has the power to create an infinite variety of speech acts *(parole)"* (Armstrong, 1983: 120) in accordance with his own personality. Similarly, according to Roland Barthes, every individual is an "active participant in a complex of cultural 'codes' that lend expressive possibility to such things as the clothes we wear, the food we eat, or the furniture we own by organizing them into a conventional system of signs" (Armstrong, 1983: 120).

Madame Merle is not only is aware of the individual arbitrariness of these social codes but takes advantage of it to hide true self from others. She falls in line with Merleau-Ponty's understanding of the individual body, which distinguishes "between public and private, between the self in its social definition and the self in itself" (Gorra, 2012: 149). This distinction echoes also William James's concept of the presence of different 'social selves' in one

individual. In the novel, instance of this is always Madame Merle, who is able to present a version of her, in order to conceal her true self.

3.9 Isabel's Tragic Statue

According to Hughes, James's treatment of dress is impressionistic in its effect and contrasts the photographic realism of painting (2001: 63). Despite his economical descriptions, however, James "was aware of the significance of dress in the construction of a character" (Hughes, 2001: 63). In *The Portrait of a Lady*, dress seems to have simultaneously both positive and negative connotations (Hughes, 2001: 64) – particularly black dresses, as previously mentioned. Isabel's black dresses are, on the one hand are directly concerned with her life in society, while on the other hand, they are part of the process of constructing her identity. In the end, she becomes a tragic figure (Hughes: 2001, 65), something that recalls Dorothea Krook's theory about the 'tragic effect', which "depends upon our recognizing that the hero shall be in some way responsible for the fate that overtakes him" (1967: 51). Isabel, in fact, is aware of being responsible for what has happened to her, and she accepts the responsibility for her tragic misunderstanding. For this reason, she portraits herself as a "tragic statue" (Hughes, 2001: 65) or as a white "angel of disdain" (James, 1980: 530).

Even if the references to it are modest and not entirely familiar or straightforward, they are a powerful element within the novel. James emphasized the importance of the aspect of one's "shell" and one's identity at the same time that Isabel's wardrobe echoes her movements of consciousness.

We can therefore conclude that the function of dress in *The Portrait of a Lady* is not limited to pure description, but rather it is aligned with the 'social imagination' of the observer, which is

extremely personal and implies the creation of a very subjective impression of the observed object – dress and its wearer.

3.10 Isabel's Portrait(s) in Theory and in Practice

I will now focus on the discrepancy between Isabel's ideas about dress, the "shell" of human beings, and her practice. As I have argued, Isabel disregards clothes as "a limit, a barrier" (James, 1984: 253) because they are imposed by society and, therefore, cannot not express the self. The latter cannot be influenced by the material world and is rather independent from social standards.

However, while the protagonist is very convince of her theory, her practice collides with such conviction. Isabel's indifference to clothes and external appearances needs in fact to be questioned because, while disregarding the material and superficial nature of dress, she is actually very aware of the impressions other people may get from what she wears. James writes that "her life should always be in harmony with the most pleasing impression she should produce" (James, 1984: 105). Even though she tells Ralph that she is "not in the least stupidly conventional" (James, 1984: 111), as a matter of fact she wishes to please everyone and to do so she has to adapt to conventional and social standards also through the clothes she wears. The dichotomy between her theory and practice is highlighted in the novel through the character of Henrietta Stackpole, who recommends her:

> 'You think you can lead a romantic life, that you can live by pleasing yourself and pleasing others. […] there's another thing that's still more important – you must often *dis*please others. […] That doesn't suit you at all – you are too fond of admiration, you like to be thought well off. You think we can escape disagreeable duties by taking romantic views – that's your great

illusion, my dear. But we can't. You must be prepared on many occasions in life to please no one at all – not even yourself' (James, 1984: 268).

This passage first emphasizes the gap between Isabel's beliefs and her attitude and furthermore highlights her use of dress as a mean to conform and adapt to gender expectations and social norms.

Evidence of Isabel's concern about impressions can also be found in her tendency to judge people by their outward appearances. Indeed, "she was usually occupied in forming theories about her neighbours" (James, 1984: 182) from the clothes they wear. Evidence of this are her words about Caspar Goodwood:

> she sometimes thought he would be rather nicer if he looked, for instance, a little differently. His jaw was too square and se and his figure too straight and stiff. […] Then she viewed with reserve a habit he had of dressing always in the same manner; it was not apparently that he wore the same clothes continually, for, on the contrary, his garments had a way of looking rather too new. But they all seemed of the same piece; the figure, the stuff, was so drearily usual (James, 1984: 170-171).

This comment is far from supporting her theory: she does care about what one owns and wears. The climax of the protagonist's tendency to understand people from their image takes shape in her impression of Madame Merle:

> Madame Merle was a tall, fair, smooth woman; everything in her person was round and replete. […] Her features were thick but in perfect proportion and harmony. […] Her grey eyes were small but full of light and incapable of stupidity. She [was] very charming. […] A charming surface doesn't necessarily prove one is superficial […] Madame Merle was not superficial – not she. She was deep. (James, 1984: 228,229, 244).

Thus, Isabel believes that Madame Merle's "perfect proportion" (228) and "charming surface" (244) evidence her depth of spirit.

Not only attention to dress, but also disregard of dress represents a hint for the protagonist to deduce the nature of a character. An example to confirm this is her understanding of the figure of Osmond from his clothes. As she observes in Chapter 22, he "was dressed as a man dresses who takes little other trouble about it than to have no vulgar things" (James, 1984: 280). Therefore, Isabel's impression of him based on his outfit is that of a person who ignores his style and the possession of vulgar objects. The choice of an outfit and the prevention to choose an outfit are two sides of the same coin: in both cases dress entails allusions on the nature of the individual. Nevertheless, it has already been said that she misreads Osmond.

Important to note is that, although she categorizes people throughout the novel according to the impressions she gets from them, she upholds her theory by arguing that those observations are all "frivolous objection[s]" (James, 1984: 171) and therefore distances herself from her own words. In this way, she insists that dress does not express the self, still she judges people according to it.

After illustrating the impressions Isabel gets from other people, we can ask ourselves what impressions Isabel wants to produce on others through her clothing. Isabel not only tries to please everyone, but she is also committed to achieve the image of a true and complete lady. This hint is strongly suggested by Mrs. Touchett after the death of her husband and when Isabel's acquires the new status of rich heiress. She urges Isabel to "play the part" (James, 1984: 262) of a "young woman of fortune" (1984: 262). To play this part properly, Mrs. Touchett suggests that "the girl's first duty was to have everything handsome" (1984: 262) and clothes belong to this category too. Thus, Isabel's duty is to "know how to play the part – […] to play

the part well” (262). This conversation occurs right after Isabel’s famous conversation with Madame Merle.

Mrs. Touchett is very much alike Isabel because she is also a free spirit and fond of her independence, but Isabel recognizes a touch of conventionality in her appearance, she “retrieved an […] appearance by a distinguished manner and, sitting there is a well-worn waterproof, talked with striking familiarity of the courts of Europe” (James, 1980: 82).

Despite defining herself as an independent woman, Mrs. Touchett still matches with the figure of the English aristocratic lady by paying great attention to her appearance and dress, which need to mirror her social status. Moreover, it has already been proved that the way she dresses, represents for her a disguise that protects her from the external circumstances and conceals her deeper feelings. It is a second skin that makes the inside impermeable to the outer world. She is impenetrable but at the same time her figure is appropriate to social expectations. Similarly, Isabel attempts to achieve this very same goal when wearing black dresses. Her black dresses, on the one hand, render her inscrutable because they do not reveal much about her; on the other, they communicate an image of a perfect and respectable lady. This is especially visible when she wears the velvet ball-gown and Rosier comments her figure as “the picture of a gracious lady” (James, 1980: 418). Her dress and its rich fabric give Isabel the quality of a proper lady, which, in a nutshell, is precisely the part she wants to play. However, being a lady comes at a cost to Isabel, which is sacrificing her own identity. Rosier’s reading of Isabel’s black dress echoes Hollander’s classification of ‘sober’ black, the conventional, resigned and self-denying colour. It can therefore be assumed that Isabel and Mrs. Touchett employ their clothes in the same way, simultaneously showing their social selves and concealing their more intimate and private parts.

The evidence that Isabel is playing a part and that she plays this part wearing black clothes is found in Chapter 42, when she realizes her unhappy marriage – her husband knows her better than she thought and he cannot stand her. At this precise moment the protagonist tells us something very revealing, “now there was no use pretending, wearing a mask or a dress” (1984: 475). These momentous words are striking since they show firstly that Isabel has accepted her aunt's recommendation to play the part and wear the mask of the perfect lady and secondly that she plays this part by disguising herself. Allegedly, her clothes do not represent her, still, she contradicts herself by claiming that she does not care about her clothes, because she actually uses them consciously and attentively to play the part of the lady.

The thesis according to which Isabel does care about clothes and makes conscious use of them is reinforced by the fact that in the first Macmillan Cambridge edition of 1882, Henry James originally conceived the above-mentioned passage as follows: “there was no use pretending, playing a part” (James, 2016: 886). Thus, in the original version Isabel's thoughts echoed exactly Mrs. Touchett's words when she suggested that she should “play the part”. We can therefore assume that James revised this passage to introduce dress as a symbolic pattern. This revision emphasizes the value James attributes to dress and its power in revealing something about the wearer. Consequently, we can understand that Isabel plays the part of the perfect lady and through this part - or mask - she deceives Osmond trying to appear the woman she is not. Although one may believe that Isabel was forced by Mrs. Touchett to change her look, one may also claim that she is responsible for deceiving Osmond through her clothes. According to Isabel, however, the same cannot be said for her husband because she acknowledges that he “had not disguised himself” (James, 1984: 475) from the beginning of their relationship. Because of this, in the end, Isabel accepts her fate and assumes the responsibility for her circumstances. She has thus sacrificed herself to duty and to the self-image she has decided to present.

This change in Isabel is also noticed by her closest friends, who cannot understand what she is hiding behind that perfect lady's disguise; for instance, Caspar Goodwood confesses to her: "You're perfectly inscrutable, and that's what makes me think you've something to hide" (558). Similarly, Ralph Touchett recognizes that "he free, keen girl had become quite another person; what he saw was the fine lady" (James,1984: 444).

By the time she arrived in England her theory about the *shell* was rather straightforward: "she would be what she appeared, and she would appear what she was" (p. 105). However, her idea of freedom and independence was disproved by Madame Merle and Mrs. Touchett. Evidence of this is indeed her dressing practice, which shows the breakdown with her personal theory.

Hence, she ultimately succeeded in appearing the perfect "social animal" (James, 1984: 244) just like Madame Merle and expressing herself through the "conventional tongue" (1984: 244) by wearing conventional dark dresses. Unfortunately, Isabel embraced ladyhood at the expenses of her true self and freedom. The narrator furthermore points out that she failed to consider that "the effect [Isabel] produced upon people was often different from what she supposed" (James, 1984: 108). This implies that she overlooked the part played by the observer in giving his personal reading of what he sees – of Isabel. Thus, her mask produces a different effect depending on the point of view from which it is viewed. This shows that, in the end, we do not have a single portrait of Isabel, but more than one.

CONCLUSION

There is much to support the view that it is clothes that wear us and not we them.

Virginia Woolf, *Orlando*

To despise fashion as frivolous is therefore the most frivolous posture of all.

Elizabeth Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams*

The investigation of 'literary dress', as represented in *The Portrait of a Lady*, opens the path for new critical readings of fictional characters and the relations between their bodies and identities. Dress emerges as a significant tool for characterization and as a powerful and expressive symbol of the self. This goes far beyond the representation of dress as pure historical documentation, contributing to the general realistic effect of the novel. Since dress often conveys meaning, being a complex and multifaceted sign, its representation often complicates interpretation. In fact, as Cristina Giorcelli has suggested, dress's "significance is mostly polyvalent" (2017: 24).

In the case of Henry James's work, the studies carried out by Anne Hollander (1993) and Claire Hughes (2001) have considered dress from the perspective of colour in its power to express characters. However, the significance of dress in *The Portrait of a Lad*y and, more specifically, for the protagonist, is very contradictory.

This thesis has illuminated the gap between Isabel's dressing theory and her dressing practice. Isabel's vision, which emerged during the famous conversation with Madame Merle about the

shell – the metaphorical symbol of dress – emphasized her idea that dress is absolutely unrelated to the true self. On the other hand, Isabel is very aware of the impressions that others may get from what she wears and, in turn, she formulates opinions about people based on their outfits.

Although Henry James considered dress to be the "most personal shell of all" (1984: 148) in terms of the expressiveness of one's identity, Isabel's theory takes exacts the opposite path, as supported by her words in Chapter 19: "the clothes which […] I choose to wear, don't express me" (James, 1984: 253). They are instead a barrier imposed by society that both limits her free self-expression and other people from grasping her real identity. However, her disregard and indifference to external appearances has been called into question by her practice. Hints that Isabel is actually aware of the power of her clothes can be found in various sections of the novel in which the narrator emphasises that her major concern was to convey a good impression on others. In one of these sections the narrator states that "her life should always be in harmony with the most pleasing impression she should produce" (James, 1984: 105) – needless to say, dress plays an emblematic role in this concern. Further evidence that Isabel is preoccupied with impressions can be found in the fact that she understands people from their outward appearance.

Katherine Joslin argues that "dress functions as hieroglyph: its material presence drapes the body, revealing and concealing intricate patterns" (2009: 7). Likewise, we can argue that, although he never lingered on this specific narrative component, Henry James, understood the potentiality of dress in expressing (or hiding) characters' subjectivity. Furthermore, thanks to his refined vision, he also recognized that dress is always both experienced and observed. Especially in the latter case, dress contributes to the construction of the 'social imagination' of the observer. Isabel and her dress, hence, being placed at the centre of James's "house of fiction" (James, 1984: 45), which has "not one window, but a million" (1984: 45) through

which to look at them, produces very different impressions on the observers. As James remarks in his Preface of the novel:

> These apertures, of dissimilar shape and size, hang so, all together over the human scene that we might have expected of them a greater sameness of report than we find. […] But they have this mark of their own that at each of them stands a figure with a pair of eyes, or at least with a field-glass, which forms, again and again, for observation, a unique instrument, ensuring to the person making use of it an impression distinct from every other. He and his neigbours are watching the same show but one seeing more where the other sees less, one seeing black, where the other sees white, one seeing big where the other sees small, one seeing coarse where the other sees fine. And so on, so on" (1984: 46).

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