

TEXTILE PRODUCTION, FASHION  
DESIGN, AND THE LANGUAGE OF  
CLOTHES IN THE 19TH CENTURY  
CAPITALIST SOCIETY

**Abstract**

The main objective of this paper is to explore and describe women's textile culture in the Victorian epoch, the language of cloth, and the craft of dressmaking. My analysis complements the growing literature on the social consequences of fashion, the elasticity and refinement of women's proficiency in dress culture, and the composition of female subjectivity in Victorian fiction. The findings of this study have implications for women's fluency in dress culture, the social relevance of clothing, and the longevity of needlewoman in Victorian literature..

**Keywords:** textile, fashion, dress, Victorian, seamstress, femininity

**JEL CODES:** L67; J16

# PRODUCȚIA DE TEXTILE, DESIGNUL VESTIMENTAR ȘI LIMBAJUL HAINELOR ÎN SOCIETATEA CAPITALISTĂ A SECOLULUI AL XIX-LEA

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**Rezumat**

Obiectivul principal al acestui articol este de a explora și descrie cultura textilă a femeilor din epoca victoriană, limbajul pânzei și măiestria în croitorie. Analiza mea completează literatura în creștere cu privire la consecințele sociale ale modei, flexibilitatea și rafinamentul competenței femeilor în cultura îmbrăcămînții, și compoziția subiectivității feminine în ficțiunea victoriană. Concluziile acestui studiu au implicații pentru fluența femeilor în cultura vestimentară, relevanța socială a îmbrăcămînții, și longevitatea cusătoreșelor în literatura victoriană.

**Cuvinte cheie:** textile, modă, rochie, victorian, croitoreasă, feminitate.



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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Victorian women were required to practice proficiency in 'dress culture' – the interconnected crafts of designing and construing fabric and household textiles, using education in cloth (sewing and decoding dress) and education in print (reading and writing). Textile culture typified the intricacy of women's multitudinous literacies. Women writers asserted needlework and writing as women's activity (craft with the needle might establish a personality). Incessantly debating the jargon of print and the one of fabric, Victorian women authors utilized twofold literacy as a kind of command, a means of society, and a measure of women's dissimilarities. Proficiency in dress culture was particularly gendered as a kind of womanly knowledge in Victorian social tradition (muliebrity demanded fluency in interpreting cloth). Plain needlework incorporated designing clothes, mending, and darning, while on the contrary fancy sewing applied to knitwork, crocheting, embroidery, and lace-making (Bayles Kortsch, 2009). From the early 1840s via the end of the century fictions concentrated on women gaining their living by needlework (a current working-class heroine is the dressmaker): a leading character earning her living by stitching was something common for the Victorian reading public. Writers highlighted specific features of the status of the needlewoman to make her illustrative for the needy. Reducing the price of cloth, the industrialization of the textile sector (Popescu, 2014a; 2013a; 2012) assisted middle-class women in pursuing the caprices of fashion. The dressmaker was a person to whom the Victorian reading public could react without bias. Individuals encountering a woman stitching in fiction could empathize with the personage. For numerous feminine readers the dressmaker would set off the awareness that they could unquestionably be positioned in an identical situation. The responsibilities of a needlewoman shifted from plain seaming to cutting and fitting, and ultimately to supervising and training. (Alexander, 2003)

## 2. WOMEN'S TWOFOLD PROFICIENCY IN PRINT AND DRESS CULTURE IN THE VICTORIAN EPOCH

In Braddon's 1864 novel, *The Doctor's Wife*, the principal female character, Isabel, dressing, reading and stargazing before the mirror, self-consciously enacts the articulation and image of the protagonist in the Victorian novel. Isabel's status as a literary participant in the fiction is established both by her position as a reader and as a character. Via a process of reading, cogitating and self-fashioning, she restyles herself into a paragon of feminine decency. Standing before her mirror, book in hand and reflection in front of her, Isabel weighs up her subjectivity. The figure of Isabel expounding on the relative reverie or verity of her presence, dress and standing before her mirror links the processes of reading, dressing and reflecting. The representation of Isabel reading before the looking-glass is a

metaphor for literary self-awareness in the fiction. In her function as reader, she ponders on the fictionality of the principal female character as a literary concept. Dressing and dressing-up enable the Victorian woman to adjust herself for the aim of complying with or surpassing the paradigmatic representations of muliebrity and heroine-ship (Seys, 2014, pp. 177–200). Victorian girls employed samplers to duplicate and familiarize themselves with the letters of the alphabet: the Victorian scheme of training girls in alphabetic proficiency synchronously taught embroidery, being composed of a discrete vocabulary. Literacy in dress culture entailed the capacity to read and to write in the given language, Victorian girls being instructed how to interpret cloth and recognize stitches and the models into which the latter could be organized. Mastering to read fabric and design enabled girls to set about writing with that cloth, creating their own textile items. Textiles were traditionally constituents of a girl's birthright, joining her when she went to her husband's household. Girls had to know how to interpret fabric for the aim of creating or decorating textile objects, grasping the features of different stitches and seams and the characteristics of various types of cloth, becoming able to fashion and carry out their own creations, to construe the social relevance of fabric, and to demand it as their legitimate inheritance (Bayles Kortsch, 2009).

Isabel is utterly knowledgeable of the literary relevance of the fabrics and clothing she wears. Staring without success at her conceptualization in the mirror, Isabel covers the fictional and the real, by that desiccating her own literary reveries and those of the Victorian reading public. In the looking-glass, Isabel redesigns the "material" of reality just as she reconstructs her plain stuff dresses. Via introspection and redesigning, Isabel surpasses her inferior status as an item of reading and the stare by evolving into a representative in her own image and narrative. The mirror is a symbol of elevated self-awareness and subjectivity for Isabel, enabling her to eclipse the fantastic and sensual representations of Victorian women as principal female characters and readers, and advance beyond them into self-determination. Isabel confronts corruption and temptation and, by starting to accept and deal with the perennial kinds of femininity reproduced in the looking-glass, rises above them and attains independence as a reader (Seys, 2014, pp. 177–200). A fictional personage can predicate operation within the story space. The circumstances of the historical space can be expressed by the writer in the story space. Increased consciousness, particularly the knowingness that one's private existence is associated with the political area, is required for feminist predications of intervention. Spoken word is best constituted by instants in discussion in which personages undertake rival tenets about the cultural function of women (predication of woman's intervention frequently happens in instants when the female character can intensify counteraction to language that seeks to classify and denigrate her). Concrete action is to the highest degree expressed by the narrative scheme of description of personages'

undertakings (the manner for women to alter their subservient status is via action). (Youngkin, 2007)  
 (Table 1)

TABLE 1 - WOMEN'S TEXTILE CULTURE IN THE VICTORIAN PERIOD

Author/ novell year	Women's fluency in dress culture
Elizabeth Gaskell, <i>Mary Barton</i> (1848)	Needlework clicks along as an incessant unnoticed undertaking to the more moving scenes of the novel.
Margaret Oliphant, <i>Kirsteen</i> (1888)	Needlework is a shared endeavor carried out with other women at home. Dressmaking is an art, whereas the seamstress is an artist, entailing the capacity to read and act according to present patterns, and the aptness to see beyond and through them to relevant likelihoods: it may be an art to be pursued by upper-class women, or plain toil, the degrading slog of working-class dressmakers, serving as a metaphor for a specific type of writing.
Sarah Grand, <i>The Heavenly Twins</i> (1893)	Women who imitate the most recent fashions (including tight-lacing) are working- or lower middle-class, typified as the casualties of mass consumerism. Class distinctions establish dress selections just as they regulate how drastic one can manage to be.
Sarah Grand, <i>The Beth Book</i> (1897)	Dress culture can assure women financial autonomy, creative display, a scheme to be concerned with the poor people, and social resistance. The most successful social militants employ dress culture to design a genuine self (women's rights policy is the activity of upper-class women). The endeavor of becoming a self-fulfilled craftsman and the effort of amending social inequality cannot be attained as individual objectives. Needlework and clothing a self change into a manner of stitching and dressing a better society, dress and sewing provide manners to oppose and reconstruct patriarchal community, and women must employ their personal domestic crafts for the public good (the link between needlework, reading, and writing is found to be a beneficial one). Disciplined areas of needlework bring about the stuff for writing. Embroidery supplies the instruments of creativity, a type of relaxing and productive background sound for the creativity. The dual task of altering community and producing beauty is essentially the property of women. Dress culture permitted women to reconcile the breach between personal and public labor fairly. The fundamental if baseless self-determination comes in dropping dress culture completely.
Gertrude Dix, <i>The Image-Breakers</i> (1900)	Novels can most precisely display the difficulties of both late Victorian society and utopianism. Natures that advance complete proficiency in fabric and in print tend to attain realization and autonomy, identifying chances to select

	<p>their own channels of self-expression, to support financially for their own necessities, and to give out of their supplies to other individuals. Female readers perceive clashing representations of themselves in the mirror – a bricolage of feasible manners to undergo and convey late Victorian womanly identity, allowing the images of other women and the tense connections among them.</p>
<p>Olive Schreiner, <i>From Man to Man, or, Perhaps Only</i> (1926)</p>	<p>Needlework is a fertile, inventive undertaking, functioning as a metaphor for women's incapacity to communicate in the public space. Needlework performs a diversity of roles, and these images operate together to produce a bricolage of meaning, and constitutes an intrinsic component of the pattern and ceremony of domestic responsibilities (the needle generates a kind of writing the masculine sphere cannot decode). Women's proficiency in dress culture is a type of womanly knowledge, imagination, and power. Speech reflects the undertaking of needlework, the latter entailing taking particular pieces of cloth and sewing them together. Similar to stitches and seams, words and sentences unite together happenings, notions, and individuals. Needlework carries out the practical and metaphorical goal of determining a chance for discussion among the female personages, and furnishes a foundation of knowledge by which they interpret each other: it supplies a peaceful space for philosophical meditation and mental struggling, stimulates energetic inactivity, and discloses secrets. Twofold literacy did not supply similar experiences for women authors or readers (garments denote and establish identity).</p>
<p>Ella Hepworth Dixon, <i>The Story of a Modern Woman</i> (1930)</p>	<p>Reproduction and needlework are related to working-class women's asinine toil, the requirements of the body overriding those of the reason. Working-class dressmaker stitches automatically, lacking attentiveness, imagination, or choice. The needlewoman is a symbol of the persecution of upper-class women who employ 'feminine schemes' and 'artifices' to navigate patriarchal community. The act of needlework is either slog or pastime, the dissimilarity residing in the class status of the woman who does it (women interpret each other's garments).</p>

Adapted from Bayles Kortsch, 2009

### 3. THE GENDER POLITICS OF VICTORIAN GARMENTS

The garments one is dressed in and the manner one sits in them is a conventionalization of the figure that signifies one's gender. Women's garments remained detailed and extremely decorative during the

19th century (their clothing undoubtedly certifies to moneyed women's ornamental function). Women's extremely decorative garments distinguished the wealthy woman's sphere from the one of drudgery, associating her with relaxation and luxury, and enabling her visibly to carry out both her gender and class peculiarities. Garments act as a signifying scheme that displays an individual's gender, class, and social status. In the 1840s, the widespread Gothic style dress was typified by a long waist and boned bodice. Prevailing garments were tight and form-fighting via the 1870s and 1880s. Beliefs of body representations in fiction are far less blatant than in narratives that definitely seek to persuade women to dress in specific types of dresses or corsets (the corset was an established item of women's clothing) (Krugovoy Silver, 2004).

Fashion was a scheme for women to be fond of womanliness as a separate item of ocular pleasure, was determined by a woman's capacity to educate her taste and adjust her particular style to unsteady group policies (Popescu, 2014b; 2013b; 2013c), and proved its partisans' self-control by evidencing their capacity to accommodate their bodies and needs within the limitations set by strict dress codes (restrictive clothing stood for the willpower and relaxation of the woman of rank). Victorian mothers considered fashion periodicals to rig out themselves and their daughters in the current modes. By pursuing fashion conventions, women grasped to adjust their figures to a social matrix. The most noticeable satisfaction Victorian fashion provided to women was analyzing other women and being examined by them. Women's publications supplied broad sharing for the fashion representations that affected joint taste. The most thriving women's publications both constituted the most recent fashions and inculcated women household skills. Manufactured by women, for them, fashion plates requested a female look for conceptualizations that put women, their figures, and the items that beautify them on display. The reification of female bodies in fashion plates improved the subjectiveness of the women who perceived them (Marcus, 2007).

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

The implications of the developments outlined in the preceding sections of this paper suggest a growing need for a research agenda on women's literacy in dress culture, the material culture of dress and sewing, and popular culture's images of the seamstress in the Victorian community. This paper seeks to fill a gap in the current literature by examining the employment of dress to fashion femininity, fictional portrayals of the seamstress, and needlework's function as the archetypal marker of Victorian femininity.

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