

S · T · Y · L · E
and the
SINGLE GIRL

How Modern Women
Re-Dressed the Novel, 1922–1977

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to boom her” (*Diary 2*: 319). Her notes and diaries frequently mention clothing, including her anxieties about what she called her “dress mania” (*Diary 4*: 229). Despite Woolf’s privileged class, her elegant figure, and her dressmakers, she alternated between insecurity and satisfaction regarding clothing (Cohen 149–50, 162–64). She fretted about whether outfits would be ready in time, whether they would become her, and—after the fact—whether she had looked good in them. That is to say, many of Woolf’s private remarks about dress style sound like stereotypical feminine clothing chat, supposedly dull to thinking women. Woolf herself wondered, “Why am I calm & indifferent as to what people say of Night & Day [her latest novel], & fretful for their good opinion of my blue dress?” (*Diary 1*: 284).

Appropriately, then, Woolf endeavored to dissect her own dress concerns: “I must remember to write about my *clothes*. . . . My love of clothes interests me profoundly” (*Diary 3*: 21). She did so in “The New Dress” (1927), in which a single woman attends a party given by that fashion leader Clarissa Dalloway. Unable to afford a fashionable new dress—“fashion meant cut, meant style, meant thirty guineas at least” (170)—Mabel Waring nevertheless has been caught in the fashion paradox discerned by Georg Simmel, who pointed out how fashionable dressing aims both at social inclusion and at making one stand out from the crowd. Woolf precisely spells out the dilemma:

But why not be original? Why not be herself, anyhow? And getting up, she had taken that old fashion book of her mother’s, a Paris fashion book of the time of the Empire, and had thought how much prettier, more dignified, and more womanly they were then, and so set herself—oh, it was foolish—trying to be like them. (170–71)

In her hopes to “be original,” Mabel and her dressmaker create a retro-style Empire yellow-silk gown. The dress pleases her when she tries it on in Miss Milan’s workroom, creating as transcendent a moment of being as any in *Mrs Dalloway* or *To the Lighthouse*:

When Miss Milan put the glass in her hand, and she looked at herself with the dress on, finished, an extraordinary bliss shot through her heart. Suffused with light, she sprang into existence . . . the core of herself, the soul of herself. (172)

CHAPTER 2

The Self-Fashioned Dorothy L. Sayers

DOROTHY L. SAYERS may seem an odd spokesperson for the stylish single girl. Sayers was not known for feminine beauty, and her only novels were detective fiction, a popular genre famed for elaborate mental puzzles. Yet detective fiction began in the nineteenth century, just as dress became a serious topic and Aestheticism started celebrating decorative surfaces. For Sayers, those surfaces were paramount. She saw dress primarily as a costume for deliberate performance; she also used writing to fashion herself a costume, aided by the conventions specifically associated with detective fiction and with scholarly work—both masculine genres when she began. Her work was, for Sayers, a refuge from sexual stereotypes: “I belong to a profession in which women suffer from no inferiority,” she insisted (*Letters* 2: 368). More broadly, she employed traditional standards of objectivity to avoid intrusions into her private life. To a personal query from a PhD candidate she responded coldly, declaring that books should be read and evaluated independently of the author’s biography (*Letters* 4: 16–17). Of course this scholarly ideal also may serve as a defense, and Sayers’s gregarious surface masked a very private self, ironically fashioned after the modern male dandy.

given (as in *Quartet*) a final short chapter from a man's perspective. Mackenzie, unexpectedly encountering Julia once more, finds the "romantic side of his nature assert[ing] itself. . . . 'I'm not a bad sort,'" he tells himself. "Who says that I'm a bad sort? . . . How many of them would give a drink to a woman who had smacked them in the face in public?" (190). His self-congratulatory generosity subsides into melancholy, as Julia accepts his money without thanks or comment. He escapes into the street for Rhys's smashing concluding line: "It was the hour between dog and wolf, as they say" (191). The twilight image might be stretched to describe Rhys's experience of the thirties; it also prefigures the bestial and lupine imagery of *Midnight*, which moves beyond Mackenzie's skilled ironies to become the masterpiece of Rhys's first career. More fragmented, more symbolic, and more experimental than her earlier works, this fourth, overtly prewar novel also presents her most convincing and most culpable protagonist.

STYLING PREWAR PARIS: *GOOD MORNING, MIDNIGHT*

Having established herself as a modern novelist, and having taken her third protagonist into the dark, Rhys greeted stark night in her fourth, and nearly final, novel. *Good Morning, Midnight* turns both the modern woman and the modernist novel inside out. The narrative voice is gruesomely frank, describing hallucinations of a mechanized society, bestial imagery, and cruel objectifications of both sexes. Through her protagonist Sasha, Rhys punctures not only the traditional marriage plot but its male modernist revision, since the book concludes with a horrifying, ironic play upon Molly Bloom's famous "Yes." It was sixteen years since, in the conclusion to James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), Molly had welcomed her husband to her bed, thereby reaffirming her commitment to their marriage. And not only had high modernism aged, but those promises of modernity had gone terribly wrong. That *Midnight* bears a sense that "the night is coming," is unsurprising, in war-threatened Paris. What shocks is that Sasha embraces the impending doom: "May you tear each other to bits, you damned hyenas, and the quicker the better. . . . Let it be destroyed. Let it happen" (173).

This bitterest novel also suggests Rhys's surprising response to a happier life. In the thirties, her writing found critical success and, unlike her downward-spiraling single girls, she remarried. Rhys had lived with her

observers too painfully small to contemplate for long. Philip Larkin read the very funny *Excellent Women* as

a study of the pain of being single, the unconscious hurt the world regards as this state's natural clothing . . . time and again one senses not only that Mildred is suffering, but that nobody can see why she shouldn't suffer, like a Victorian cabhorse. (Larkin, *Selected Letters* 368)

Likewise, A. N. Wilson finds a “bleak Chekhovian question . . . at the heart of Pym's comedy” (xvi)—against which we may set Pym's own query, “Why is it that men find my books so sad? Women don't particularly” (*Very* 223; 8 December 1963). This interpretive gulf between the sexes also may be regarded as a chasm between perceiving subject and comic object, categories breached by and through Pym's fictional spinsters. Still, the chasm gapes wider in Spark's *Girls of Slender Means*, which further explicates the single girl's dress in response to male-authored postwar fiction.

THE FIFTIES BLOKE VERSUS *THE GIRLS OF SLENDER MEANS*

That expectations are diminished is a given for postwar women, but a given that their male counterparts struggle to take in. These spinsters' lives are small, and their stories conclude in minor keys. Where, then, lies comedy, happiness, or laughter? The unexpectedness of Spark's destructive undercurrents “would be comic if we could laugh,” John Updike mourned when he reviewed *The Girls of Slender Means* (1963). Yet anyone who has read portions of Spark's fiction aloud, or seen the stage or film interactions of Miss Brodie with her class, can attest that Spark often is hilarious. What should sober us, Updike explained, is the implication “that the farcical world of her portrayal is the *real* world”—in this case, the world of 1945 London, where a boarding house and an innocent young woman are about to be blown to shreds (“Between a Wedding” 311). Spark's shocking climax hinges upon choosing a fashionable dress over a human life, but *Girls* bears a typical disjunction between trivia and serious events. Spark and her protagonists demonstrate a detachment integral to the comedy of the object from the first. When Caroline of *The Comforters* (1957)



FIGURE 7. Miller in Hitler's Bath [David E. Scherman] / [The LIFE Picture Collection] / Getty Images.

past the dead “monster” Hitler, suggests a gulf between the sexes all the greater for the strippings of war. The war did not end gender divisions any more than it ended the wearing of clothing: soon Miller would get out of that tub and dress once again.

For that matter, she remained style-conscious throughout the war. Scherman recalled that in wartime France, Miller, the formerly “fastidious, obsessive clothes-horse,” soon looked like “an unmade, unwashed bed” (10). But Miller herself wrote to her editor Audrey Withers, as she and the American troops approached Paris, “There they are already