

Double Threads

Reading Dress, Fashion, Narrative and Representations of Femininity in Victorian Popular Literature

Madeleine C. Seys

School of Humanities

Discipline of English and Creative Writing

The University of Adelaide

September 2014

Contents

<i>Abstract</i>	iii
<i>Statement of Originality</i>	vi
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	vii
<i>Introduction</i>	
Sartorial and Narrative Threads: Reading Dress, Fashion, Texture and Textuality in Victorian Popular Literature	I
<i>Chapter One</i>	
White Muslin: The “Woman in White,” “Muslin Martyrs” and Narratives of Ethereal and Ephemeral Femininity	56
<i>Chapter Two</i>	
Silk and Velvet: Colours, Textures and Fashions of Figuring, Disfiguring and Artistic Dress	109
<i>Chapter Three</i>	
The Paisley Shawl: Patterns and Narratives of Femininity, Disguise and Artifice	160
<i>Chapter Four</i>	
Tweed and Wool: The “Woman in Grey,” Tailoring New Identities and the Heroine as Author	209
<i>Conclusion</i>	
(Re)Fashioning and (Re)Writing the Victorian Heroine	264
<i>Notes</i>	277
<i>Bibliography</i>	282

Abstract

In “Clothes: From the Novelist’s Point of View” (1886), Deliverance Dingle states that contemporary novelists have “a genius of taste, and can express a character or indicate a mood by the very colour and texture of a garment, by the play of folds and the sweep of the train of a robe” (266). Taking this statement as its foundation, *Double Threads: Reading Dress, Fashion, Narrative and Representations of Femininity in Victorian Popular Literature* explores the use of dress to fashion femininity and female sexuality and to tell the heroine’s story in British popular literature from 1860 to 1900.

The heroines of Victorian popular literature are women in white muslins, *femmes fatales* or aesthetes in silks and velvets, women in paisley shawls, New Women in grey, and cross-dressing and rational-dressing politicians and writers. *Dress* sites the heroine within fashion history and in relation to Victorian notions of femininity and female sexuality; it also provides the means to refashion them.

Double Threads argues that dress functions within structures of characterisation and narration, and the politics and poetics of representation and genre, in telling the heroine’s story. It examines the sartorial, material, narrative, literary and fashionable threads of Victorian popular literature and their interweaving in representations of the heroine.

This thesis is structured by a chronology of fashions in dress and literature from 1860 to 1900. It traces changes in the colour, texture and style of the heroine’s dress from white muslin, silk and velvet, and the paisley shawl, to wool and tweed, and cross-dressing and rational-dressing in a selection of popular novels and genres from sensation fiction to social realism, the New Woman novel and feminist utopian fiction. Each chapter draws on the histories of sartorial cloths

and styles, as material and literary objects, in contextualising their use and refashioning in popular literature.

Recent scholarship in Victorian literature has treated dress as realist social symbolism. *Double Threads* is the first study to consider the ways in which changes in the colour, texture and styles of dress function to tell the heroine's story in a narrative and representational, as well as a social, sense in Victorian popular literature. The colours and texture of dress represent its use as realist detail, fashion-plate jargon, artistic and sensual detail, expression of individual character, disguise, socio-political and sexual symbol, and metaphor for types of representation. This thesis draws on the double meaning of thread, as both material and narrative, and of fashion, as both a style and a method for its alteration, in its reading of dress and popular literature.

Through this reading, Victorian popular literature is reconceptualised as both a literary style and critical category. It is understood as fashionable literature in the style of the time, and fashioned literature, self-consciously engaging with the means of its own production and consumption. This invites a critical reading which considers the politics and poetics of representation and reading, and is conscious of the ways which the 'popular' is constructed and represented in literary history and criticism.

This is the first study to consider the significance of the materiality and history of sartorial cloths and styles in informing the use of dress in Victorian popular literature; in this way, it provides a model for thinking about the production of dress as a metaphor for the textual construction of femininity and narrative. Drawing on threads of scholarship from fashion and textile history, cultural studies and literary criticism, this study expands the ways in which we

interpret different types of cultural artefacts, suggesting a form of reading which explores the materiality of texts and the textuality of material cloth, the fashionedness of fiction, and the fiction of fashion.

Statement of Originality

I certify that this work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in my name, in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. In addition, I certify that no part of this work will, in the future, be used in a submission in my name, for any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution without the prior approval of the University of Adelaide and where applicable, any partner institution responsible for the joint-award of this degree.

I give consent to this copy of my thesis, when deposited in the University Library, being made available for loan and photocopying, subject to the provisions of the Copyright Act 1968.

I also give permission for the digital version of my thesis to be made available on the web, via the University's digital research repository, the Library Search and also through web search engines, unless permission has been granted by the University to restrict access for a period of time.

Madeleine C. Seys

September 2014

Acknowledgements

This thesis owes a great deal to the inspiration, encouragement and guidance of others.

Copious thanks to Dr Mandy Treagus for supervising this project from its inception in my Honours thesis through to the final revisions. For all of her support, for always knowing what to say to get me writing again and for humouring me in moments of confusion, self-doubt and jubilation, I extend many thanks.

Many thanks to Dr Heather Kerr (my co-supervisor) for her ceaseless support and her careful and insightful comments on the final draft.

To Dr Maggie Tonkin, who encouraged me as an undergraduate student and has been a source of support and friendship throughout this project, sincerest thanks.

This project has its roots in a long-fostered interest in Victorian dress, social history and literature and the way in which we fashion our identity and tell our story through the clothes we wear.

Thanks must go to my Mum, Gillian Seys, for instilling in me a love of cloth, needle and thread, and books from a very young age. For teaching me to read and write through the language of cloth and, thus, providing me with the linguistic and textural vocabulary which drives this analysis, I owe her boundless thanks.

To Genevieve Seys, sister, helpmate, and dearest friend, for all of the ways she has helped me through and with this project, I cannot thank her enough. Thank you to Genevieve for proof-reading the final document.

To both Mum and Genevieve for their ceaseless love and for having confidence me when mine had failed, thank you.

Thanks to Hannah Phillip, ex-Manager of Ayers House Museum, for taking me on as a shy sixteen-year-old and giving me first-hand experience of Victorian costume and museum curatorship. Thanks to everyone at Ayers House Museum for their collegiality and their conversations on all things Victorian.

Thanks to the staff and students in the Discipline of English and Creative Writing at The University of Adelaide and the members of the Australasian Victorian Studies Association who have heard spinets of this research over the last three and a half years and provided feedback and encouragement. Especial thanks to Carolyn Lake and Jennifer Liston whose friendship has been invaluable.

The research that underpins this project was made possible by a Research Abroad Scholarship from The University of Adelaide Graduate Centre and funding from the School of Humanities. Thank you to the staff at the National Art Library (Victoria & Albert Museum), Bath Fashion Museum (Bath and North East Somerset Council) and Whitworth Art Gallery (The University of Manchester) for allowing me access to their fabulous collections.