

Social and Sartorial Elitism and the Dandy Figure in the Fiction of F. Scott Fitzgerald

Although Ellen Moers focuses exclusively on dandyism in England and France in *The Dandy: Brummell to Beerbohm*, she first introduces the early American usage of the term from the popular song, “Yankee Doodle Dandy,” explaining that “there could have been no more fitting introduction for the wordy dandy than a song written to ridicule provincialism and vulgarity *as revealed by costume*, then expanded to ridicule aristocratic pretensions, again *as revealed by costume* (12, italics in original). As the lyrics to the song suggest, a certain historical representation of the dandy—one that does not, however, acknowledge dandyism’s original discipline or its complete historical, social and sartorial transformations—was a parodic figure in America that failed to offer a serious depiction of masculinity. Cultural references to the dandy figure and dandyism do not disappear; however, they become incorporated into clothing styles intended to defy pragmatic and sartorial codes for men, such as the Zoot Suit. They also eventually make their way into American fiction of the early twentieth-century. While the influence of dandyism is evident in, for example, Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie*, particularly in the characters of Charles Drouet and George Hurstwood, I wish to argue that it culminates in F. Scott Fitzgerald’s construction of Jay Gatsby in *The Great Gatsby*. Allusions to dandyism aren’t only evident in the sartorial egregiousness of Jay Gatsby’s dress after he accumulates his wealth, but can also be found in his early boyhood exercise regimes, hygienic discipline, and study of physical deportment. Jay Gatsby may be a dandy unawares. He seems to naively and wholeheartedly believe that the clothing sent by his London tailor (which, based upon the narrator’s descriptions of Gatsby’s various suits and shirts, calls to mind the dress of *fin de siècle* dandies such as Oscar Wilde and Max Beerbohm) is fashionably class appropriate to the class he seeks membership and approval, and fails to realize that it clearly violates sartorial standards of dress sanctioned by wealthy male inhabitants of Long Island. Gatsby dresses in stark contrast to Tom Buchanan, who is hardly a gentleman, but who does, according to Jennifer Craik’s historiography of masculinity and fashion, exemplifies a certain kind of sporting masculinity fashionable during this time period. Moreover, one could also argue that, in his dressing style and habits, Gatsby approximates Thorstein Veblen’s argument in *Theory of the Leisure Class* about the function of the dress of upper class women, the clothing of whom was supposed to call attention to and represent the wealth of their husbands: Gatsby dresses in a “white flannel suit, silver suit and gold colored tie” (Fitzgerald 89), “pink suit” (129) and shirts “in coral and apple green and lavender and faint orange with monograms of Indian blue” in order to call attention to and represent his own wealth, assuming, according to a Veblenian reading, a feminine sartorial role (68). However, Gatsby may also be intentionally dressing in such dandified costumes; violating sartorial masculinity by refusing to imitate wealthy, old-moneyed class fashions to which he seeks membership.

In making forays into Fitzgerald’s other writing, as well as his own sartorial habits, I hope to demonstrate how he uses clothing as a means to critique the American social class system and prescriptive standards of masculinity.

Works Cited

- Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *The Great Gatsby*. New York: Scribner Paperback Fiction, 1995.
Moers, Ellen. *The Dandy: Brummell to Beerbohm*. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1960.
Veblen, Thorstein. *Theory of the Leisure Class*. New York: Dover Publications, 1994.