

Fashion and Freedom

Deborah Levy

Fashion and Freedom was commissioned by Manchester Literature Festival in response to the exhibition Fashion & Freedom at Manchester Art Gallery. Co-commissioned by 14-18 NOW, the exhibition explored the impact the First World War had on the changing role of women and fashion. The work was performed in the gallery on Friday 21st October, 2016 as part of the 2016 Manchester Literature Festival, and was followed by a conversation between the author and host Katie Popperwell.

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When I was a teenager most arguments with my mother were about my clothes. She did not recognise herself in me. She was baffled by what it was inside myself that I was expressing outside of myself. She could no longer reach or recognise me. And that was the whole point. I was creating a persona that was braver than I actually felt, and took the risk of being mocked on buses and in the streets of the suburbs in which I lived.

The secret message that lurked in the zips of my silver platform boots was that I did not want the approval of the people doing the mocking. This truth, for better or worse, is a potent lesson in life. Sometimes we want to unbelong as much as we want to belong. On a bad day, my mother would say to me, "Who do you think you are?" I had no idea how to answer that question when I was 15, but it's possible the pile of clothes on my bedroom floor were speaking for me.

On my way to school I used to gaze at the man employed by the council to sweep the local streets. He wore a boiler suit and heavy work shoes –and to this uniform (which I liked better than my school uniform) he had added a hat - a stiff straw boater with a blue ribbon tied round the brim. Tucked under the ribbon

were two white feathers. It seemed to me that this hat, with its atmosphere of a lazy sunny day punting down a river in Cambridge, was laughing with him as he swept up the crisps packets and cigarette butts in the rain.

I was reaching for the kind of freedom that a young woman in the 1970's did not socially possess, but I had to reach for it anyway. What else was there to do?

To become the person someone else had imagined for us is not freedom - it is to mortgage our life to someone else's fear.

Now that I am a mother myself, I try not to have arguments with my teenage daughter about clothes. I can see she is making a bid for freedom, but there are times when I step on her freedom. It is true that I would prefer her to take fewer risks, I want to protect her, but she knows she needs to protect herself from my fear. If we cannot at least imagine we are free, we are living a life that is wrong for us.

We have to imagine who we are and then convince the world that is who we are. This is a political action and the great African American writer, James Baldwin, articulated its truth in a way that has always spoken to me. For part of his lifetime, the American south was still racially segregated. If he was travelling on an interstate bus, he was legally obliged to give up his seat to a passenger with white skin.

Baldwin said this:

“All you are ever told in this country about being black is that it is a terrible, terrible thing to be. Now, in order to survive this, you have to really dig down into yourself and re-create yourself, really, according to no image which yet exists in America – you have to *decide* who you are, and force the world to deal with you, not with its *idea* of you.”*

And what if the world is at war? And what if there are sounds exploding in our heads and we are scared the roof will fall on our children? And what if we have to step over what is left of our neighbours’ house and walk into a broken world to try and buy some eggs? We still have to imagine who we are. The worst thing would be to have no ideas of our own and just follow the bad ideas that have broken the world.

And what if you were a young woman in 1894 in Britain, let’s say a middle class woman of 19, with time on your smooth, bored hands. Most days you are laced into an elaborate corset so that your sweetheart can put his arms around your waist and lift you to the ceiling like a bird. You discover that shrinking your body is attractive to him and you need to be attractive because your class of woman is not supposed to work. You have learned that one of the ways to snare your sweetheart is to appear to be fragile, weak and manageable. So, like the cunning wolf in fairy tales, you practise making your voice soft, calm, reasonable, until what started off as an impersonation, becomes your voice. Therefore you are often spoken over and spoken for, while you sit quietly in your elegant long dresses and petticoats.

You marry your sweetheart, give birth to a son and then a daughter. In 1915 your son volunteers to fight at the front and your husband takes up his position as an Officer in the British army. He has to learn how to control and care for men and command their respect, while you have to learn how to control and care for your servants. You do not ask yourself if you have earned their respect, yet you find that you're often in the company of your female servants. Their sons, like your son, will not return from war, but you don't yet know that you will share this grief. You are lonely and need the company of your daughter who has just turned twenty.

Your daughter does not wish to keep you company all day long while the clock ticks out the hours. Her voice is louder than yours and she stands and sits in a way that takes up more space in a room than you do. The hemline of her skirts have been raised, which means she can move more freely, but there is a part of you that wants to step on her freedom because you are not convinced she will be safe in the world. She signs up to drive an ambulance. On the day she leaves to take up her job, you gaze at her uniform and at her newly shaved legs – she is now wearing stockings because her legs are on show. Your daughter is going to learn how to drive an automobile and transport the wounded to hospitals. You admire her but secretly wish she would take more moderate risks with her life. As she packs her bags she knows that she has to protect herself from your fear – she has enough fear of her own.

When you at last receive letters from your beloved daughter, you become aware that she is making decisions instead of being spoken for - while you are at home commanding the servants to remove dust from every room. One bad day when you are feeling glum and heartbroken (no news from your son), your daughter returns home on leave. She is exhausted but lively, her hair is unwashed, her fingernails are broken, her skirt and jacket (darned many times) are creased, she has much to tell you, and you have nothing to tell her. You do not recognise yourself in her and you can tell she does not want to resemble you either.

As blossom falls from the apple tree in the garden, the tree that helps you mark the absence of your son and husband (they left in winter when the tree was stripped of leaves) you feel her rejection and you are sharp with her.

And then she turns on you. She tells you that your life is useless. She shames you (as if you don't have enough shame of your own) and your knees are shaking under your skirt. In a voice that is not calm and reasonable, you shout down her new freedom with all the rage of a woman who has been cheated out of her life. You hear yourself say in your new bold voice: "Who do you think you are?"

That is a complicated question for a woman to answer in any century.

*James Baldwin THE LAST INTERVIEW and other Conversations. Melville House Publishing.