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## “Reading Fashionably”

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*Modernism à la Mode: Fashion and the Ends of Literature* by Elizabeth M. Sheehan. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018. 276 pp. Cloth \$55.00.

The growing body of academic work on fashion and its connection to modernism attests to its continued scholarly importance and relevance. Elizabeth Sheehan contributes a unique voice to this conversation by defining the relationship between fashion and modernist fiction as inextricable, ever shifting, and most importantly pedagogical, as it teaches us new ways of understanding modernity and the world around us. This mode of inquiry or practice, which she calls “reading fashionably,” includes examining fashion, both as a trope within fictional narratives and also as an external force that binds aesthetic work to a cultural moment. Reading fashionably teaches us to decipher the text, culture, and feeling of a work in order to better understand both history and literature.

In the introduction, she proposes a theoretical framework based on a range of fashion and modernist scholarship, from nineteenth-century notables like Georg Simmel, J. C. Flügel, and Walter Benjamin to more contemporary theorists like Celia Marshik, Douglas Mao, Rebecca Walkowitz, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. For those entering into the field of fashion studies and literature, this part of the book serves as an excellent initiation into the discipline. The introduction also provides a solid foundation supporting Sheehan’s main thrust:

descriptions of fashion in modernist fiction can lead characters and readers to moments of existential clarity, or to what she often refers to as “ways of knowing” both the text and the surrounding world.

Sheehan demonstrates this strategy in an accessible and innovative short Coda chapter, which analyzes Miriam Ghani’s *A Brief History of Collapses*, part of a 2016 exhibit at the Guggenheim titled *But a Storm Is Blowing from Paradise: Contemporary Art of the Middle East and North Africa*. Here, Sheehan puts into practice “fashionable reading,” teaching us how to understand Ghani’s video installation and acquire new “ways of knowing, feeling and sensing via dress” (200). Breaking down the complex aural and visual components, Sheehan focuses on the movement and clothing of two women on screen, demonstrating how they provide information on German and Afghan culture, concepts of history, time, sartorial tradition, state making, power, and gender. In a rare but welcomed instance of academia-meets-the-real-world, Sheehan reveals how “fashionable reading” can enhance the cultural experience of a family trip to the museum and also become the subject of a sophisticated research project.

Each of the other main chapters focuses on groups of established modernist authors and designers: Virginia Woolf and the Omega

fashion projects; D. H. Lawrence and Futurist fashion; W. E. B. Du Bois, Jessie Fauset, Nella Larsen, and Madame C. J. Walker; F. Scott Fitzgerald and Paul Poiret. These particular groupings underscore the relationship between high modernism and popular culture. They also reveal discrepancies and conflicts within modernist works and broader cultural movements. This is especially evident in her chapter “‘This Great Work of the Creation of Beauty’: W. E. B. Du Bois, Black Internationalism, and Beauty Culture.” Delving deep into Du Bois’s lesser known 1928 novel *Dark Princess*, Sheehan highlights problems with the author’s purported idea of black beauty as a liberating path towards black identity and empowerment, pointing to instances of reductive afro-orientalism, as well as a confusing conflation of Pan-African and Pan-Orientalist viewpoints. Sheehan draws a parallel with Madame C. J. Walker’s advertisements and beautifying products, underscoring the constructive aspects of the black beauty industry. But she also highlights underlying messages of racial uplift and capitalism, which she suggests might also be a capitulation to a simplified and problematic world view. This chapter teaches us how literature and beauty shape and intersect with politics and, in the cases of Du Bois and Walker, work to both construct and threaten black identity.

While each of the main chapters echoes in some way this formula of linking literature and popular culture through fashion, only one of the chapters compares the figure of fashion designer with that of modernist author. “Prophets and Historicists: F. Scott Fitzgerald and Paul Poiret” examines the broader historical and cultural context of Fitzgerald and Poiret, focusing on their perceptions of beauty, their fashionable creations, and their roles as fashion arbiters. Comparing their personalities, careers, work, and representations of their work in periodical culture, Sheehan highlights a particular 1920s model of modernity. She points to important similarities between their negotiation of new “modes of celebrity” (163) and their mutual experimentation with form—sartorial and literary. Her balanced assessment, moreover, underscores important failings in their presentation of modern femininity, which was shaped by gendered overtones and exaggerated masculine authority.

The book’s extensive footnotes and its exhaustive bibliography are excellent resources for students and scholars of literature and fashion, as well as for specialists of modernist work. Besides a brief but engaging discussion of Italian Futurist manifestos on dress, the anglophone focus of this work unfortunately—but understandably given the parameters of the discussion—leaves out modernism beyond America and England. This omission, however, allows room for scholars in different literary traditions to consider Sheehan’s approach and theories for non-English or non-modernist fiction. Extremely erudite and groundbreaking, this study promises to become one of the standards in fashion, culture, and literary studies.

*Marylaura Papalas specializes in women writers and artists of the French avant-garde. She focuses on themes of gender, identity, urbanism, and fashion in their work and in representations of their work in journalistic, literary, and popular culture.*