

M Nava

History of Fashion

Extra Credit Film

April 29, 2019

In the movie “Colette”, fashion is used as a way of illustrating the character development and of the time and place that Colette herself lived in. The movie begins at Colette’s family home where she was born, Sidonie-Gabrielle Colette on January 28, 1873 to a well off family, Jules-Joesph Colette and Adele Eugenie Sidone, in the village of Saint-Sauveur-en-Puisaye in Yonne, Burgundy, France. At her family home Gabrielle would wear easy dresses that could be worn to walk around the garden, and afforded a great deal of mobility.

After marrying Henry Gauthier-Villars a.k.a. “Willy”, Gabrielle began her new life in Paris as a wife of this popular socialite and writer. Willy encouraged Gabrielle to wear the trendiest fashion that was commonly worn by other women in their social circles. “At this point marriage was an almost obligatory state and a young society woman began her wedded life equipped with an extensive trousseau. Intimate apparel consisted of matching sets of day and night chemises, petticoats, drawers and corset covers in the lightest of monogrammed cottons. Manuals of etiquette recommended that a dozen of each undergarment should be purchased, though American brides were occasionally cautioned not to buy too much outerwear as fashion changed so rapidly. Twelve evening gowns, two to three evening wraps, two to four street costumes, two coats, twelve hats and four to ten house dresses would be enough,” (Mendes, 28). Although Gabrielle obeyed Willy’s wishes to wear the dresses that he purchased for her, she

made an effort to maintain her effortless appearance. This was in direct contrast to the appliances that the other women in their social circles maintained, as they no doubt worked tirelessly to create dramatic hairstyles and embody the image ideals of the time. Colette appears to have opted to choose dresses that had masculine detailing. Her collars were reminiscent of the stiff collar mens shirts featured in this time. Her bodice was usually fitted and featured masculine lapels that were a feminized version of men's jacket lapels. In contrast, women in her social circles would opt for bare chested dresses, framing their elegant necklaces and chest.

When financial strife wreaks havoc on their lives, Willy encourages Gabrielle to write about her own life experiences. Willy doesn't like Gabrielle's work at first, but after Gabrielle's work begins to grow more popular, he decides to take the credit for her stories. The couple enjoys many successful years with the "Claudine" series. As the "Claudine" series grows in popularity, Willy takes advantage of the emerging market of young women that feel like they have been heard and feel validated. Willy decides to capitalize on the brand by adapting the book for a stage production. Costume from the production become so popular, that every young women wants to wear the "school girl dress" that the actress wore in the stage play. During this point, in he free time, Colette wears causal a casual shirt waist, but with her twist. Instead of featured frills, ruffles, or any other soft features. Colette's shirt waist features geometric patterns that put the focus on her face rather than her body. Her neck line is minimalistic, her bodice features micro-pleases, and overall it is a cleaner look than what was popular at the time for women in her socio-economic cohort.

As time progresses, they begin to grow apart from each other. Gabrielle decides to be called Colette, and becomes the face of the character on her stories. She enjoys the freedom that

she is allowed in the Paris social scene. There she is able to explore her various sexual curiosities and begins to dress significantly more androgynous. At this time, women were still wearing corsets and structured dresses. Colette began to embrace more masculine detailing on her clothing.

Colette was now beginning to grow stronger and more independent and found that she was no longer in love with Willy, and instead was taking the company of other women whom dressed in mens suits entirely. One of those “women” of note, whom was a transgendered man, named Missy, became very close with Colette. Missy encouraged Colette to wear suits and other men’s fashion such as hats. This was a radical idea for that time, as the gender serration in fashion was clearly defined, and women were expected to adhere to these strict social rules. Willy encourages Colette to cut her long mane of hair into a short bob haircut. This is playing up the youthful appliance that the Claudine character projects, and makes an impact as new trend away from the mounds of hair piled on top of women’s heads at this time.

Colette decides to explore her interest in performing and stars in her own stage production, co-staring Missy. The play that they presented was set in exotic Egypt. During this time, the tomb of King Tutankhamun was discovered and become hugely influential in a wide variety of things from stage plays to home decor. This orientalist that was so popularly used by designers of the time such as Poiret, seem to have inspired the costume that Colette wears in her stage play. The costume is a romanticized fantasy of Egyptian and Arabic dress. She is dressed very reminiscent of Poiret’s “Harem” pantaloons, and “Lampshade” tunics.<sup>1</sup> She wears golden

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<sup>1</sup> Metmuseum.org. Accessed May 02, 2019. <https://www.metmuseum.org/exhibitions/listings/2007/poiret>.

necklaces reminiscent of Egyptian's, a golden clad bra, and a silk skirt that allows for dancing on stage.

Colette goes on to wear jackets featuring oriental inspired embroidery and shirts with small neck ties. Although her top is a feminized versions of men's suits, she still wears long, ankle length skirts to complete her looks. Her use of color is always careful, she will wear black and khaki; white and navy blue; black, gold, and gray. She also wore a sailor inspired outfit that featured a white and navy striped top with a boat neckline, and a jacket inspired by a sailor's. This look was not commonly worn by women until the 1960s.

In the movie "Colette", fashion is used as a way of illustrating the character development and of the time and place that Colette herself lived in. The movie begins at Colette's family home where she was born and ends with a complete character evolution in confidence and dedication to exploring androgynous fashion. At her family home Gabrielle would wear easy dresses that could be worn to walk around the garden, and afforded a great deal of mobility, and finally on the stage, Colette feels free to express herself and be herself. She explored men's wear and found ways of incorporating that into a unique look that became synonymous with Colette.

## Bibliography

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