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Madeleine C. Seys, *Fashion and Narrative in Victorian Popular Literature: Double Threads* (New York: Routledge, 2018). 196 pp.

Reviewed by Sarah Parker, Loughborough University

<1>Ellen Thorneycroft Fowler's 1899 novel *A Double Thread* interweaves the narratives of twins Ethel and Elfrida Harland. Separated after the death of their parents, Ethel is raised by working-class grandparents to be a dowdy governess, dressed in plain attire. Elfrida, on the other hand, becomes a wealthy 'woman of fashion', clad in luxurious silk gowns. In the novel's final revelation, it emerges that the two women are one and the same: Elfrida has disguised herself as her poor sister (who in fact died long ago) in order to attract the genuine love of a man, rather than be courted for her money.

<2>Madeleine C. Seys's fascinating study weaves these themes of doubling, the social and symbolic significance of cloth, fashioning (and disguising) the self as narrative and sartorial 'threads'. The book begins with a comprehensive introduction that makes a convincing case for why paying attention to clothes in Victorian literature is revelatory, rather than a trivial detail that can be overlooked. Seys demonstrates that it was actually the Victorians themselves who began to seriously address the topic of clothes in literature, with articles such as (the wonderfully named) Deliverance Dingle's 'Clothes: From the Novelist's Point of View' (*The Lady's World*, 1886) showing how fashion functions to tell the heroine's story.

<3>In addition to Dingle, Seys draws on Jane Gaines's theory of the 'costume plot' (derived from her discussion of the function of costume in black-and-white film) which runs concurrent to the main narrative but occasionally disrupts its tempo. The appearance of a protagonist in a stunning silk gown, for example, might stall the narrative in a moment of symbolic tableau. Equally, the heroine's dress might inadvertently reveal her deceptive nature, or disguise her at a key moment, hinting at meanings that the narrative has yet to

reveal. Seys uses this concept to productively consider the ways that dress and narrative work alongside *and* against one another, the two levels of meaning constantly entwining.

<4>Seys focusses on nineteenth-century popular literature as the most overtly fashioned and fashionable genre. Throughout her study, she reveals how the generic conventions of popular literature are fashioned and re-fashioned, with the treatment of dress often echoing such transformations. For example, Seys traces the shift from Mary Elizabeth Braddon's devious Lady Audley (*Lady Audley's Secret*, 1862) to the later *Vixen: A Novel* (1879). Seys reveals how Braddon's challenging of her own sensation plots is reflected in the heroines' dress; Lady Audley's deceptive muslins and silk gowns become the 'simplicity and practicality of Vixen's dress' representing 'her lack of artifice' (83). Alongside sensation novels, Seys also considers the aesthetic novel (Vernon Lee's *Miss Brown*, 1884) and several New Woman novels. Sensation novelists dominate though, with Braddon, Wilkie Collins and Mrs. Henry Wood making appearances across the chapters.

<5>The structure of the book is interesting. Each chapter attends to the history of a particular fabric: White Muslin, Silk and Velvet, the Paisley Shawl, and Tweed and Wool. Chapters begin by tracing the complex histories of the cloth; histories that are entwined with narratives of imperialism, nationalism, trade and manufacture. Seys uses these contexts to unpick the fabric's fictional resonances, implying that the history of the cloth haunts the narratives in which it features. She consistently pays attention to the fact that such resonances shift over time. This is important because her historical trajectory is broad, beginning in 1860 with Collins's eponymous *Woman in White*, and extending to the *fin de siècle*.

<6>The chapter on muslin explores how this fabric represents purity and virginity, but also often holds a double meaning. It can, for example, be donned to *feign* innocence, and it can also be sinister and ghost-like, as in the first appearance of Anne Catherick in Collins's novel. The fact that the angelic Laura Fairlie can be so readily mistaken for the unhinged, deceptive Anne hints at white muslin's ambiguity. In contrast to girlish muslin, silk and velvet are emphatically womanly, moulding yet concealing the fashioned body in a sensual, sophisticated way. Seys's discussion of the erotic fantasies encoded in coloured silks in

George Moore's *A Drama in Muslin* (1886) is wonderful, paying careful attention to sensual resonances of colour and texture as the debutantes make decisions that anticipate their various narrative fates.

<7>The chapter on the paisley shawl opens with a fascinating history of the Kashmir shawl's journey from India in the fifteenth century, through to the trade of the British East India Company in the eighteenth century, to the imitation shawls produced in Paisley, Edinburgh and Norwich in the nineteenth century. In Victorian literature, the shawl's story is re-written as its Indian origins are recoded as a sign of respectable British identity. Symbolising narrative itself, with its mysterious patterns the shawl can quite literally be read, although its meanings are not always clear. It is frequently adopted to both reveal and disguise sensation heroines; Lady Audley wraps herself in one before entering the asylum, while Lady Isabel Vane's white cashmere shawl represents her redemption in *East Lynne* (1861).

<8>The final chapter on tweed and wool shows how the flouncy gowns of sensation heroines become the practical garments worn by the burgeoning New Woman. In adopting the styles and hard-wearing fabrics of men's wear, the tailor-made, bloomers and 'rationals' worn by the New Woman allow her to freely move around the public sphere—replacing the Woman in White with the dynamic Woman in Grey, who zooms around the city on her bicycle in Alice Meynell's famous essay. Seys discusses the fashioning of the New Woman in novels by Ella Hepworth Dixon, H. G. Wells, and Grant Allen, concluding with Lady Florence Dixie's utopian novel *Gloriana, or the Revolution of 1900* (1890), in which the Woman in Grey is refashioned once again as a suffragist in white. Thus, Seys's study comes full circle, with the whiteness of the 'Angel of the House' revised to represent androgyny, honesty and the *tabula rasa* of the future.

<9>The structure of the book is the source of both its strengths and weaknesses. The chapters can get a bit repetitive at times—every fabric is apparently ambiguous, and the significations discussed can sometimes feel frustratingly non-specific. Occasionally the connection between the fabric and the novels seems a bit forced; for example, neither *East Lynne* nor *Miss Brown* explicitly mentions a paisley shawl—Isabel's shawl is white, and the 'fantastic shawls' mentioned briefly in Lee's novel could be any type or pattern. An opera

cloak of 'scarlet woolen stuff' in *Aurora Floyd* is discussed in terms of the theatricality of red velvet (77), but surely if Braddon meant velvet she would have said so? The specificity of such details is important in a study like this. These few instances foster the impression that certain sartorial details are lifted from their context in order to fit the argument of the chapter, rather than arising organically from the novels themselves. Another result of the structure is that analysis of some of the novels sometimes feels a bit underdeveloped. Braddon receives comprehensive treatment across the book, but other novelists (such as Lee) are dealt with in a rather fragmentary manner.

<10>Nonetheless, these issues are to a large degree a result of the book's ambitious scope—an ambition that deserves to be acknowledged and applauded. As Seys states, her approach 'draws together the threads of literary criticism, fashion and textile history, and cultural studies' (173). One must be a consummate weaver to keep these threads from getting tangled! Seys manages to skilfully interlace histories of cloth, narratives of fashion and insightful readings of popular literature in an engaging and enlightening blend that provides a model for future interdisciplinary scholarship. This volume is certainly a must-read for anyone interested in fashion in literature.