

“Hot chocolate on soy?”

“Yes please,” Zoe nodded, grabbing packets of sugar as the cup was set down in front of her. She had her legs crossed and was wearing a turquoise mini dress with a screen print of Ganesh on the front and a crocheted, long sleeved vest over the top. Feather earrings dangled from her ears drawing attention to her cropped hairstyle. A henna tattoo trailed from her index finger almost up to her elbow, detailing an elaborate paisley design.

Leanie looked up from under her thick fringe and reached for the tall black. She brought it close to her face and inhaled the strong aroma. Steam rose up past her heavily outlined eyes. Leanie had on a black puffy skirt over a pair of black stockings, her shoes lay abandoned on the floor. Her corset-like top hugged her skinny frame and made the mesh-and-dark-floral combination all the more sinister.

The green smoothie with a wheat-grass shot belonged to Ann, whose hands sparkled with temporary glittery tattoos and a multitude of flashy rings as she accepted the tall glass. Ann was wearing a long, patchwork purple skirt, black skivvy and a tie-dyed jacket rolled up at the sleeves. Her hair was almost shoulder length and was curled all over the place, giving the impression she'd just stepped in out of the wind, that she'd always been just stepping out of the wind.

“Thanks,” Mac took the vitamin water and leaned back, revealing her legs swathed in mint green stockings with black tiger like stripes. Mac had a style all of her own. Today she sat across from Ann wearing black knee high boots, a mint green top and short black pencil skirt to top off her look. Her hair contrasted with this ensemble, bright purple in the sunshine and gelled heavily to keep it in place.

“Can I get you anything else?” The girls shook their heads.

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Leanie plucked a sheet of paper from the table and held it at arm's length. Simultaneously squinting and sighing she said, “We'd better get started on this. It isn't going to write itself you know.”

“We aren't trying to write it today, Leanie,” Zoe said, as she poured a third packet of sugar into her hot chocolate. “We're just brainstorming.”

“Yeah. Okay. I still have to write it all down though. So anyway, we're looking at 'The Lost

Dog'[i] and a story from 'Every Secret Thing'[ii] in relation to this quote by Virginia Woolf[iii]: 'There is much to support the view that clothes wear us and not we them; ... they mould our hearts, our brains, our tongues to their liking.' So what do we think?"

The other girls leaned forward and grabbed various notebooks, print-outs and novels while Leanie dragged the netbook onto her lap, tucked her bare feet underneath her and opened a new document.

"I reckon," started Mac, "that there are parts of 'The Lost Dog' where that totally fits, but then there's parts where the opposite seems true."

"Want to give us an example Mac?"

"Yeah, hang on." Mac thumbed through her copy of the novel. "Here, page 292." The sound of flicking pages rose as three more books found their way to page 292.

"It's where Nelly talks about Atwood going through phases of buying her things," Mac explained. She read aloud, "...in one of them he bought her concoctions of silk, or lace, or gossamer French chiffons, an armful of extravagance, feminine wisps one or two sizes larger than Nelly required. Slipping from her shoulder, a dress emphasized the slightness of her frame. There was also the dress-up aspect: lipsticked, hung with flashing paste jewels, she was a child essaying sexual desire."

"So, that's an instance of the clothes wearing the body you think?" asked Ann, tilting her head slightly. Her wild hair shook a little at this slight movement.

"Yes," replied Mac, "I don't think Nelly viewed herself as a kind of child-like sexual fantasy, I think that it was the clothes that made that her reality. The clothes along with Atwood I suppose. They both moulded Nelly into something she wasn't."

"And an example of the opposite is on the next page," intervened Zoe, who'd been reading ahead, engrossed in the book she's read several times already. She shook the sleeves of her crocheted vest out of the way and said, "Nelly goes on to talk about how she rebelled by shaving her head and wearing old Doc boots. Nelly was rebelling against Atwood's view of her and then proving it with clothes."

Ann scoffed, "Proving it with clothes? What do you mean?"

"I mean, like, she was proving that she wasn't this child sex symbol by taking control of her appearance in a way that would make it very hard to go back to being that symbol."

"It's kind of a power play isn't it?" suggested Leanie.

Sipping her vitamin water and frowning, Mac replied, "I think that whole relationship was a fight for power."

"Well, yes, but what was the weapon of choice? Clothes. If you look on the previous page, 291, you can see how it all started. Atwood would buy Nelly clothes to wear and at first she liked it, but eventually she wanted to express her true identity, her artist identity. She kind of did it in a provocative way too, she didn't just dress differently, she actually cannibalised the 'sweet' clothes Atwood bought her and turned them into a freakish mutation of the two identities she

was trying to express- the artist and the wife. It was very passive-aggressive.”

“I love Nelly, I think she’s my favourite character out of all the books we’ve read this semester and her dress sense is just really amazing.”

Leanie looked up from the notes she was typing. “You would Ann, she dresses mostly in the kind of crazy outfits I’d expect you to turn up in.”

“Like what?”

“Like, hang on a tic, let me see.” Leanie reached for a notebook that was filled with references she’d taken from the book. “Okay, like the first time Tom sees Nelly, on page 10. She’s wearing a red crayon in her hair. You would totally do that if your hair was longer Ann.”

Ann jingled her bracelets. “It would look very arty.”

“See? What else…” Leanie scanned her notes. “Here, page 54, there’s a heap of Nelly’s outfits listed. Take a look. I think the only thing that’s mentioned that I can’t picture you in is the stilettos and skirt combo.”

Ann flicked to page 54. “Tunic and wide trousers, yep, rosary necklace and bindi, perhaps not the rosary, but maybe with some mala beads, henna, that’s more Zoe’s thing but I’d certainly do it, dreadlocks, I wish, chopsticks, if I had longer hair yes, the anti-chinoiserie, maybe.”

“Look at what you’re wearing today for example.” Ann glanced down at the patchwork and tie-dye combo she was sporting.

“Anyway, we need to keep going. If I don’t have at least two pages of notes by the end of this, we’re not brainstorming hard enough,” declared Leanie.

“Alright, alright.”

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“Can we look at that quote in terms of any of the stories in ‘Every Secret Thing’ then?” asked Mac. “I thought that the best fitting story was ‘Tides of Change’.” The others murmured in agreement.

“I mean, there’s some really good quotes about clothes and identity in other stories, but I think in ‘Tides Of Change’ it’s all brought together and made really obvious to the reader.”

“Yep,” agreed Zoe, “and I think there’s a real moment of realisation in there that links in really well with Virginia’s quote about clothes shaping our hearts brains and tongues. If you look on page 93, after the cast-off clothes have been delivered a few times and the bush mob were getting used to it, this happens: ‘Along with the change in fashions came a very distinct change in emotions. People were beginning to feel jealousy and hatred toward their fellow men and women in a way that had never been experienced before.’ And a little further along it reads: ‘The bush mob had become selfish and demanding’. I think this really shows how the clothing changed the collective psyche of the bush mob.”

“Oh!” exclaimed Ann, “I actually have a couple of articles that talk about the relationship between clothes and groups that would go really well with the point you’re trying to prove Zoe.”

“Pass them here first so I can take down the references.” Leanie reached for the articles and quickly added the reference details to the brainstorming document before passing them back to Ann.

“Well, this first article by Mark Rademacher^[iv]- is that how you say it raid-matcher? Or is it rad-ey-makker?- anyway, he wrote this article about how clothing affects groups during the transition between high school and college and he says some really interesting things about clothes. He says that ‘clothing, by definition is a public marker of identity’ which I think is true.” “Well I think it’s a very true statement,” interrupted Zoe, “but how does it relate to the bush mob learning to hate one another?”

“Hang on, I’m getting there. He also talks about clothes as a way to express a changing identity to the rest of the world, and how to fit in, students often conform to some kind of ‘group norm’. What the bush mob has done by accepting the cast-off clothes and changing their style from ‘butt naked’-”

“Butt naked?” laughed Leanie, spilling the last of her coffee on her dark corset style top.

“Yes, butt naked, it’s from page 111 in the story of ‘The Missionaries’. It cracked me up, so I had to write it down. Anyway, they changed their style from butt naked to this hodge-podge cast-off clothes kind of style and in doing so, they changed their identity. It was now unacceptable for them to not be wearing clothes, so they were conforming to a group norm. They were also expressing this new identity that they’d gained and they were expressing it publicly to the bush and mission mobs.”

“Okay then. How about that other article, what does it say about group identity and clothes?” Asked Mac, passing a handful of serviettes to Leanie as she did.

“Well, this second article is by Maria Piacentini and Greig Mailer^[v] and they also talk about individuals conforming to group ideas of fashion and what is acceptable and what is not, but they also focus on the symbolism behind the consumption. They say that the symbolism can be used to construct identity, which the bush mob did because the cast-off clothes symbolised the white ways of thinking and acting, and that affected their identity. So once the identity of the bush mob was changed, the individuals had to fit in. There are a couple of quotes in here that really express that, Leanie can you write them down?”

Leanie replied, “As long as you speak slowly and don’t say ‘butt naked’ unexpectedly again.”

“Okay, so on page 255 it says ‘clothes act as signals that the wearer is similar to other people who wear similar clothes’ and I think given that the bush mob all wore cast offs and the mission mob all wore habits and what-not, it showed that the groups were different from each other but that the members of each group were similar to the other members of their group.”

“I agree with that. What else have you got Ann?” asked Zoe as she lifted her heavily decorated

hand to drain the last of her overly sweetened hot chocolate.

“Well,” Ann, flicked over her heavily highlighted notes, “here on page 258 they say ‘Clothing was also used to mark the dissolution of certain life stages or roles’. Is that uncanny or what?”

“Very.” Mac opened her copy of ‘Every Secret Thing’ to a page she had dog-eared and read out, “‘You’d think the mission mob would realised that even though you can dress a monkey in a suit, you can’t teach it quantum physics. But it was their expectation that the bush mob would go straight from the bush shedding their nargas and spears to arrive at their new houses as muruntanis and with their heads full of murutani knowledge. ... They’d turned these savages into sophisticated house dwellers.’ That’s on page 97, right at the end of that chapter.”

Zoe interjected, “so the bush mob dressing in the cast-off clothes marks the end of their life as a bush mob and the start of their life as a house dwelling mob?”

“Yes,” agreed Leanie, typing as she spoke. “This is really great guys. Is that all you have from those articles Ann?”

Ann scanned the rest of the article. “Yeah,” she answered, “The rest is basically the same stuff we’ve already discussed, clothing and identity and groups... nothing new.”

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“You know what all this reminds me of?” Asked Zoe, looking at Mac.

“Let me guess, me?”

“Well, yeah, for obvious reasons. Because after that thing with-” Mac glared at her. “-with, what’s-his-face, you decided you wanted a fresh start. You changed your name and totally changed you style. I used to love those floaty pastel dresses you wore.”

“I used to love them too. But they’re just not ‘me’ anymore.”

“My point exactly.”

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“Can we go back to ‘The Lost Dog’ now?” Ann inquired. “I feel like we need to talk more about Nelly.”

Leanie giggled. “There’s just one last thing I want to say about ‘Every Secret Thing’. Girls, can you go to the last story, the one where Pwomiga tests out the theory that the murutani have a secret way of coming back to life please? I think there are some important points in there. On page 177 where he’s covering his body in the white ochre, could we count that as a form of clothing?”

“Absolutely,” decided Zoe. “It’s exactly what we were talking about before; he’s using clothing to signify that he’s a part of a particular group. Very symbolic.”

“I actually have a quote here from an article I found that links in with that. Johnson, Schofield and Yurchinson[vi] say ‘I think that you can fool people by dressing a certain way and that it’s

maybe not really you but it's someone who you want them to believe is you for that moment or for that job.'"

"Mac, pass me that article and I'll pop the details in with our references." Mac handed the article to Leanie who took the reference down and added the page number (132) to the growing document. Leanie continued, "Then there's a quote that goes with what we were saying about the bush mob turning into a house mob. Two pages over, on 179. It says 'They knew that something had changed while they'd been occupied with learning how to act like a murutani and there was nothing they could do to change things back to how they were before.'"

"Perfect, now add it to your notes so we can talk about Nelly some more!"

"Calm down, Ann."

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"Can I get you another drink?" asked the barista. Zoe looked at the other girls, who shook their heads.

"I might have another hot chocolate thanks."

"Soy right?"

Zoe nodded.

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"So," began Ann, "did anyone else find articles about fashion and identity that we could link with Nelly?"

"Actually, I did find one," replied Zoe.

"Well you go first," interjected Leanie. "I've got one as well, but it's easier to type and listen than type and read."

"Do you want me to read bits from yours?" offered Mac, reaching over.

"Sure, thanks."

"Okay, well, mine is about clothing, identity and women and it's by Guy and Banim[vii]. It goes over similar stuff to the other articles, like that clothing expresses identity and women use clothes to express identity and to manipulate identity etcetera, etcetera. There's two points in this that stand out for me. The first is on page 317 where they talk about using clothing to experiment with personal style and how this can sometimes be 'a form of rebellion'. They say that our personal style evolves over time."

"So," mused Leanie, "we can relate that to Nelly, because she clearly uses style to rebel against Atwood."

"Yes, but she also has a style that has evolved over her life-time," added Ann. "She went from accepting Atwood's instruction on how to dress to rebelling against it and forming a more artsy-

style to forming a style entirely her own. She parodies her Asian heritage right? But she also wears things simply for herself, practical or whimsical she really doesn't follow the norms of fashion and style in society."

"I can feel a quote coming on Ann, what have you got?"

"Well, okay. In true Nelly style, I've actually got two. First, from page 151 I've got this; 'Nelly Atwood was also Nelly Zhang. She was A and Z, twin poles, the extremities of a line that might loop into a snare. She was double: a rich man's wife and an artist; native yet foreign. Duplicity was inscribed in her face.' I love that word, duplicity. The second one is from page 318 and goes like this; 'Nelly offered detail and excess. Things extra and other, oddments left on the pavement when the bins had been emptied, illuminated capitals for a manuscript not yet written. She offered diversions, discontinuities, impediments to progress.' In describing Nelly, hasn't De Krester also described her style? Captured that nature about her?"

"Yes, it's great." Leanie's fingers flew across the keyboard to record Ann's ideas about Nelly.

"Zoe, you said there were two points you liked in that article, what's next?"

"The second part relates to the first one I guess, and it ties in pretty well with what Ann was saying about Nelly. On page 321 it says this; 'Women's everyday interactions with their clothes revealed they did not have a single image of themselves.' And a little further on it says; 'Nevertheless most women recognised their relationship with clothes was ongoing and dynamic and that a major source of enjoyment for them was to use clothes to realise different aspects of themselves.' I mean, Nelly certainly didn't have a single image of herself, and her relationship with clothes has changed throughout her life. She went from being imprisoned by the clothes Atwood bought her to being freed by the realisation that she could wear them any way she wanted. The freedom from traditional ideas of style and fashion gave Nelly an opportunity to realise the aspect of herself as an artist and how important that actually was to her."

"That's really good Zoe."

"Thanks Mac."

"Should I read out the parts from your article Leanie?"

"Not yet, let me finish typing what Zoe was saying ... okay, yeah. Read the bits that are highlighted in green and circled in pink."

"You," Mac announced, "are a bit of an organisation freak. Anyway, this article is by Felshin[viii] and, hey! The Virginia Woolf quote is on the front."

"That's how I found it."

"Right. Well, this bit on page 20 is highlighted *and* circled," Mac rolled her eyes, "and it says; 'Because clothing is seen as a densely coded system of signification that transmits psychological, sexual and cultural messages, many temporary theorists have focused on its role in the construction of identity.' Care to explain Leanie?"

"Well, I think it's saying once again the same thing as the other articles, that clothes give out messages and are linked to identity, but I liked the kinds of messages specified. If you think

about it, Nelly's clothes can be seen to transmit psychological messages. Didn't Atwood explain away her unusual style as a 'hormonal thing'?" The girls nodded in agreement. "Her clothes also send cultural messages, think of all the times she parodied her Asian heritage for example. And finally, she definitely sends sexual messages. I've got two quotes from the book to back that up." Leanie shuffled her computer and books around looking for the page of her notes from the novel again.

Zoe thoughtfully slurped the remains of her second hot chocolate and offered to take notes on the computer for a bit.

"Thanks. So, from the book, there are two quotes I noticed about Nelly's sexual representation, apart from the one we spoke about first, when Atwood dressed her as a sexual child. From page 160 Tom mentions he saw a glimpse of Nelly's flesh. It reads; 'He thought there was nothing more present, more material, than her flesh; and nothing he found more disturbing.' So that was how he thought of her exposed skin before they got together physically and then on page 325 right after their physical encounter it reads; 'She retrieved his bedspread from the floor and arranged it about her shoulders. Its loose blue folds, in which tiny mirrors glittered, lay open at her breasts. The soft indigo cotton flowed like a kimono. This brazen orientalism achieved, she was ready to begin.' It sort of shows both a sexual message and a cultural one. Nelly and her doubles." Mac handed Leanie's article back to her.

Leanie opened the article and explained, "here on page 22 Felshin mentions that clothes are a means of 'addressing the unstable nature of identity' and I think that it's a perfect way to sum up pretty much everything we've discussed this morning. Clothes help form identity but identity and *how* clothes form identity are two things that never stay the same."

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"Have you seen the girl sitting by the window?"

The barista turned his head, "Yeah, she's been here for most of the morning. Why?"

"She's not disturbing the customers?"

"Not that I've noticed."

"She looks like she was dipped in glue and dragged through a flea market[ix]. *And* she's taking up the entire lounge setting."

"I don't want to kick her out, boss. She's been ordering hot chocolates like they're going out of fashion."

References

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