

# An Examination of the Link Between British Masculinity, Socioeconomic Class, and Male Dressing Throughout Historical Periods

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## Abstract:

This essay explores the relationship between British masculinity, socioeconomic class, and male fashion across various historical periods. It highlights how social class and gender have influenced men's clothing, noting that fashion has often focused more on women. The study uses object analysis from museums to examine historical male clothing, comparing it to women's fashion to understand how masculinity was expressed through attire. The goal is to investigate how class and masculinity are interconnected through male fashion in different eras.

**Keywords:** British-Masculinity, socioeconomic class, male fashion, historical periods, object analysis, gender, identity

## 1. Introduction

As for Western societies, the main determinant of individual identities are parameters, including gender, class, occupation, religion, as well as ethnicity, and in countries, for instance, Britain these days, individuals have complicated identities, which includes several meanings and associations. Furthermore, over time, these meanings and associations have evolved. Twigger (2017, p. 51) reported that one of the ways through which an individual creates their identities in a modern environment is by their properties i.e., social class. The perception of clothing is adjudged as a practice of utilizing fashionable materials for constructing identity.

Throughout the history of mankind, it should be noted that a significant proportion of fashion research in Western countries has focused on women's clothing at the expense of men's clothing. Men's fashion is in most cases ignored or not given sufficient consideration, this occurrence has been emphasized by Finkelstein, a frequent criticism in the present culture is that males are not included in the fashion frenzy. (Bennett, 2005, p. 106). The emphasis of clothing is on various physical qualities and incorporate cultural connotation to physical inequalities existing between men and women. It is more comprehensive than merely drawing attention to the body. Simply put, clothing is usually applied for identifying gender attributes including masculinity. Men's dressing is related to but distinct from the fashion codes of women. Meanwhile, contemporary women's fashion guidelines have focused on acquiring a style worthy of being commended. The fashion portrayal of males has been designed to enhance their active duties, especially as regards work and social status.

Prior to the presentation of the article outline, it is essential to provide a brief introduction to the contextual meaning of masculinity in clothing, implying the presentation of the body gender. It is contended by Entwistle (2000, p. 141) that clothing being a natural component denotes a critical parameter during the development of masculinity and femininity; it provides transformation of nature into culture through the layering of cultural connotations on the body. No intrinsic connection exists between a piece of clothing and femininity or masculinity, on the contrary, it has a presence of culturally specialized connotations. Resultantly, the approach through which femininity and masculinity are expressed by clothing has cultural variations.

Subsequently, a question is presented: what the existing variable correlations between masculinity and social identities by are examining series of varying historical periods. Specifically, what form of masculinity is expressed by the clothes of varying cultural perspectives across various periods, as well as the manner in which the particular male garment is defined in the diverse eras regarding masculinity?

The current paper will conduct a thorough assessment of historical assessment into male clothes through the application of various selected research methodologies. The aim is to study the correlation between diverse social classes and masculinity within the context of selected object definition at varying levels, as well as the way they mutually interact.

First, an introduction of how the male fashion evolved across diverse historical periods and related theories will be presented, and to ensure an apparent explanation of the reason this is considered to be a relevant decisive factor in the transformation of masculinity definition, using the female dressing to compare, this study adopts a suggestion of object analysis of selected objects in the Victoria & Albert Museum, alongside Los Angeles County Museum of Art and certain supportive evidence of printings. Overall, object analysis denotes a procedure connected with the subject of material culture that involves a close and comprehensive assessment of items or artifacts.

Regarding the underlying motive behind the selection of object analysis, it is essential to refer to certain sentences of Prown (1994, p. 133). In accordance with his contention, he stated that the study of objects' beliefs, values, concepts, behaviors, as well as assumptions is referred to as material culture. It is likewise consistently applied to imply the artifacts themselves. The substantial proof suggesting the existence of humans during the period of its creation is the existence of items. The assumption of those that produced, commissioned, purchased, or applied the things, either through a direct or an indirect means. The assumption of individuals that utilize them and likewise extends to the general community where the beliefs of the wider culture exist. The word "material culture" therefore directly and effectively refers to the object of study, which also matters and material, along with its purpose of understanding culture. Consequently, this methodology offers an intellectual perspective when examining objects.

Furthermore, the evaluation of the selected examples is conducted in chronological order, these are variously selected male-related historical clothes depicting diverse typical groups for discussing the various definitions of masculinity based on certain academic theories.

Finally, I would prefer to state an objective fact: at the time of this thesis, because of the global force majeure epidemic. Currently, I am residing in China for online classes and the information for this thesis was obtained from the internet.

## 2. 17<sup>th</sup> Century: Macaroni



Figure 1. The Macaroni ensemble: Man's three-piece suit, ca. 1770 Sword with Chatelaine, late 18<sup>th</sup> century. (LACMA)



Figure 2. *How d'Ye Like Me*, published by Carington Bowles, 1772, hand-colored mezzotint. Credit The trustees of the British Museum.

From the period of the mid-17th century, as a result of the prominent custom of the Grand Tour, a conventional trip to Europe was taken by European men of higher status in the society with adequate wealth and prominence to attain adulthood. A certain proportion of those that had embarked on the Grand Tour to Italy through France adorns ultra-suits in contrasting colors, for instance, pink and green, high heels, and excessive wigs. Their style was intentionally designed to project expensive and lavish, which directly contradicted the conservative style that is known as “Macaroni.”

Figure 1 depicts one of the examples, this 1770s macaroni style outfit is inclusive of a shorter and tight-fitting green coat with a high fold-over collar, complemented with tight-fitting breeches. The observation reveals that the macaroni costume has a higher semblance to those worn by courtly men, which emphasizes feminine color patterns, as well as textile decoration.

This stem from the fact that the choice of these garments, the fabrics along with pattern utilized for producing them, as well as the time and money spent on self-modeling denoted a habit, which from a modern perspective is defined as feminine and soft to the extent of being considered as unmanly. This form of clothing in the mid-17th century is considered an artifice in male fashion or effeminate.

According to McNeil (2018, p. 92), he stated that Macaroni clothing is adjudged as a form of clothing lacking masculinity because the English dress symbolizes the constitution since it did not provide a man the restraint of unease, but rather the prospect of acting in the most appropriate way possible. Thus, due to this reason, the fops and macarons of the late 17th century were criticized in the print media, as well as in pictorial satire because of their extravagant attire, the selected case study is the Figure 2 brought by Carington Bowles, a London publisher in November 1772. Carrington is an elderly man adorning an exaggerated wig stands in a stylish interior with his right hand on his cheek, while his left hand was inside the pocket of his breeches, his appearance seems as an androgynous commoner, who is dressed fashionably, satirizing the absence of masculine clothing through the depiction of this humble personality with simply a mutilated sword, as well as a protruding vulva-like fold that represents the assumed location of his penis. Thus, their extravagant portrayal is considered feminine by their social contemporaries.

Furthermore, the Macaroni style featuring an absence of masculinity does not simply receive society disapproval but also remains unfancied from the political perspective by certain parties. Moreover, Charles James Fox denotes another example of Macaroni that represents the British Whig statesman. Fox was eventually prominent as among the leading ‘Macedonians’ or men in London widely popular for their tight and bizarrely designed outfits, following a two-year grand tour of Europe at the age of 20 years. In addition, a political message was

subtly conveyed through this macaroni appearance, since the Whig party absolutely opposed absolutism, thus the existence of the Macaroni costume was sarcastic that the Whig representative members adorn this form of costumes as a statement opposing the monarchy of that era. This is supported by McNeil (2018) who asserts that The British authorities encompassing the King and Queen disapprove this particular costume, believing him to be excessively pompous and immensely conceited.

According to the summary of the above information, this form of clothing was adjudged at that period as a figure that provoke the core facets of masculinity, devoid of the masculinity protocol, and regarded as a negative figure of the social community. Simply put, Macaroni is considered as not sufficiently masculine, and consequently, it lacks a reputable status and reception in the society of that period.

### 3. 18<sup>th</sup> Century: Victorian Dress



Figure 3. A portrait of a family group in a Victoria era 1837 from Victoria & Albert Museum



Figure 4. A day dress made in 1837 from Victoria & Albert Museum



Figure 5. A black and white photo of a British man wearing frock suit in the late 1820s from Victoria & Albert Museum

The commencement of the Victorian era officially began from the seventeenth century to the eighteenth century. The way males dress from this era had considerably transformed in contrast to the earlier Macaroni style. The fashion for men is now plainer, streamlined with silhouettes and the clothes have fewer ornaments on them.

Figure 3 displays a water-colored portrait of the Maurice family in a house in 1837.

From the painting, it is depicted that a male figure is positioned to the far right, along with him to the left, a girl of young age wearing pink clothing stands behind a day bed, whereby a woman is resting who wore a patterned dress and a white hat, to her left another young girl stands, resting her hand on the rear side of the bed. It could be readily seen that the clothing adorned by the woman resting on the bed is exhibited besides this painting (as depicted in Figure 4). Considering the description of this object, it contained pleats, and all over the dress, gathers are applied. At the upper arm position, a Gigot sleeve that is fashionable is accomplished through intricately stitched pleats. Fleece was utilized by the dress producer for interlining the densely pleated skirt to ensure the body is provided with extra size and fullness. It is revealed from the painting the extent of exaggeration observed in the female dresses in contrast to the male dressing which is rather of simpler design with less decoration. From this dissimilarity, it is shown that men did not pay significant attention to their style of dressing, their attention has deviated and drifted away.

From the depiction shown in the figures above, in accordance with Craik (1994), since the 18<sup>th</sup> century Victorian and European rituals, there has been the existence of gender euphoria and sexual attitudes. Particularly, these concepts increase the basic divisions existing between genders and apportion them to particular roles and locations. Through this procedure, women are steadily provided the relatively fashionable role. Particularly, the range of British male fashion was considerably smaller.

In the era of Queen Victoria's first reign, women belonging to this era are categorized in the domestic sphere, and this typecast confined them to household responsibilities of catering to the family (husband and children) welfare. Wives in the Victorian era became their husbands' properties, which subsequently ensure husbands have domineering rights over what their wives do with their bodies, such as giving birth to children, sex, as well as domestic labor, besides losing their money and material properties.

The 'Vicarious leisure' theory proposed by Thorstein Veblen (2016) supports this, which states that the perception of this upper class but the new extremely rich lady by the leisure class is as submissive, and he considers her role to be equivalent to domestic servants. The perception of these women is as men's properties, passive beings, which is reflected through their ornate, hefty, inappropriate, and confining attires they wear. Furthermore, their dressing is closely connected to fashion, representing the inclination for consuming



extravagantly and lavishly. In addition, the clothing of women in the Victorian era was a crucial sign of indirect leisure because the dress made it impossible for the wearer to work or find it challenging to work, and this demonstrates her remoteness from productive employment alongside her leisure spending.

Contrastingly, it has been revealed from Figure 5 the male attire in the same era with the previous Victorian dress from Figures 3 and 4. Apparently, the attribute of the suit has been plainer and streamlined in silhouette in contrast with the Macaroni clothing. There is a deviation in the general center of the outfits from a decorative and sensational style to a more practical and competent one. This probably indicates that during that era, the men's clothes were no longer flamboyant and fancy but instead were substituted with more professional clothes that are less decorated and with less monochrome colors.



Figure 6. 'Bulletin of fashion' by unknown maker in 1853

It is essential to present the phenomenon of overlooked male dressing that occurred in the Victorian era. It denotes a prominent hypothesis namely Great Masculine Renunciation first noticed in 1930 by German psychologist J.C. Flugel. From this notion, it is critically contended that fashion is downplayed by these strong professional guys as frivolous, rather than flaunting their wealth and authority through their spouses by motivating them to adorn trendy materials that are expensive, including captivating dresses, jewelry, as well as pleasures. A solid proof in support of this theory could be reflected in the engraving made in 1837 (Figure 6). During that era, male clothing is observed in this plate from the trade periodical Bulletin of Fashion. While several men were depicted having corresponded three pieces suits of dark colors. Explicitly, Jackson (2006) contends that following the late 1820s of the Victorian periods, women are the sole recipients of luxurious attire. The focus and attention of men are more on public appearance as serious and composed professionals both in the society and workplace. Furthermore, fewer fashion products for men are determined through the established conventions of masculinity that ordinarily consider fashion to be the unique attributes of women and assume that they are the gender known for fashion in the human species (Benedict, 2005).

Furthermore, it could be surmised that men exhibited the tendency to display their social status, as well as possession during this era. Their preference would be to wear a three pieces suit that till presently persist. The suit tends to project a logical impression to attain the needs of the wealthy class. According to the description of Kutcha (2002), he described this type of suit as elegant and regal since it redefines the men belonging to the upper-class status has been masculine during the 18th century. Consequently, the three pieces suit's definition that could be considered as a masculinity concept is significantly impacted through social rank, as well as types of jobs, rather than attractive appearance and clothes wore in this period.

#### 4. 18<sup>th</sup> Century: Dandy



Figure 7. Dandy ensemble 1820 Los Angeles County Museum of art

The style of clothing for men had passed relevant and apparent modifications on the basis of the theory of Great masculinity renunciation earlier stated, and an individual with the highest contribution concerning revolution of the male fashion is George Brummell, who was born into a family of middle-class economic status. He was regarded to be the pioneer founder of dandyism through revolutionizing the custom of men's dressing, which subsequently earned him a high reputation in society coupled with authority. His deviation from aristocratic adornment and lean towards the adoption of subtle sartorial elements facilitated the beginning of a new period for men and their bodies. Nigel (2012, p. 88) assumes that the dandy style that was designed and produced by Brummel oppose the social order, and the core of this form of contradiction is his implementation of a streamlined and simplified silhouette as a means of but portraying the proclamation that the priority is no longer hereditary alongside elite status, and the reinvention of the masculine body in contemporary forms.

A classic example of dandy fashion is depicted in Figure 6. This denotes an ensemble kept in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. During manufacturing, the technique utilized for creating its tailcoats includes cutting edge tailoring techniques, which twisted wool fabric into idealized formats, meanwhile, pants that accurately project a masculine figure are expressed and created through a front cutaway of the coat and vest above the hips.

In the course of Britain's industrialization in the late 18th and 19th centuries, the power of the wealthy aristocracy is relinquished to the increasingly emerging professional middle class, and extremely bright, as well as expensive wears were considered a sole feminine domain. To flaunt their social status, serious and dignified professional men embraced three-piece suits that remain relevant nowadays (Jackson T. & Shaw D. 2006, p. 25).

Subsequently, the expansion of the middle class, as well as the burgeoning impact of the increasingly growing values denoted the hallmark of the 19th century. According to the definition provided by the sphere of separation' ideology which defined the function of middle-class women in relation to the family and household, while for men, they roamed and conducted business in society and the place of occupation beyond the domestic context, in accordance with a theory confirmed in this environment.

Based on what is stated above, it could be assumed that the British dandy fashion act as a representative of the masculinity that corresponds with the level of influence in the society and workplace. Entwistle (2000) supported this notion by stating in his book that men are expected to operate in the socio-political world, and their unvaried clothing style sparked the desired effect within the social and political context, hence, the purpose of wearing clothes by men is simply to enhance their status in the society.

Edwards (2004, p. 5) maintained that the most fundamental basis of masculinity has invariably been working, and in a more specific context, the Western industrial capitalism, as well as in gender roles, work has been adjudged as the most basic parameter in the development of accomplished masculinity. Not only is occupation crucial for men, but also represents a core dimension of their identity and masculinity. Furthermore, it is equally an integral component of their identities' constituents, therefore, masculinity is directly proportional to work accomplishment, regardless of a middle-class profession or working-class manual labor.

Summarily, the dandy ensemble allowed middle-class businessmen to define their place in comparison to women and helped them to break away from the upper classes. From the merchant's perspective, whereby the genuine markers of masculine virtues are hard labor and industry, it is maintained by the latter that no longer is the aristocratic origin considered valid. Simply put, the core dimension to middle-class masculinity is the concept of the professional man.

An example of the middle-class masculinity is reflected in the Dandy suit from Figure 7. The male of the Victorian era was dedicated to the central theme of the middle-class masculinity representing workplace accomplishment, therefore, no longer is masculinity in the professional context confined solely to the upper class, but steadily extend to include the middle class. Hence, in the workplace environment, masculinity is no longer restricted to the upper-class men.

### 5. 19<sup>th</sup> Century: Teddy Boy



Figure 8. Surfers, Soulies, Skinheads & Skaters: Subcultural Style from the Forties to the Nineties described in the exhibition publication, part of an outfit named 'Teddy Boy UK c1970 Revival'.



Figure 9. Victoria & Albert Museum Department of Engraving Illustration and Design & Department of Paintings, Accessions 1946. London: Published under the Authority of the Ministry of Education, 1949.



Prior to the introduction of the subsequent Teddy boy suit, briefly, the Edwardian male suit will be presented below as an intro for the subsequent text of Teddy boy. Following the conclusion of the Victorian era, and with the relinquishing of power to Prince Edward VII, simply close to the period of World War I. Figure 9 depicts a Fashion plate from 1906 demonstrating various formal suits of men in a ballroom setting that occurred in the course of the Edwardian period.

The constituent of a formal attire includes a black tailcoat, together with a black tie over black woven or striped trousers for a formal occasion. A white U-neck vest is worn within the context of a white bib button shirt with a wingtip collar and a white bow tie. To cap it all, the attire is completed with a clean pair of white gloves and a black silk high hat. From the depiction of the pictures, it seems the daytime and evening attires of the gentlemen during the Edwardian era remained the same, in which the preferential clothes remain slim, tight-fitting wears in dark colors, simply slight alterations in the design, with the noticeable parts being the cut off jackets, and the style of collars, etc.

Moreover, following the conclusion of the Edwardian era, as well as in the advent of the Second World War, the Teddy boy, which denotes one of the most prominent and widely acknowledge subculture emerges. A style was devised by men's tailors in Jermyn Street, as well as the West End that was based on the Edwardian period at the turn of the century. They aspired to market their products to a class of young officers recently discharged from the services. Nevertheless, this style was disapproved by these officers, who are underwhelmed with lots of unsold clothes. To earn some profits, they auction off their job clothing at extremely less expensive prices to men's shops in east and south London, which were appreciated by the local working-class young men. By 1951, the 'Teddy Boy' image gradually emerges (Mitchell, M., 2019).

Figure 8 depicts a three-piece suit, comprising of jacket, waistcoat, and trousers in grey wool, as well as black velvet, which was designed by Edwin Hardy Amis for Hepworth, London, circa 1972. As regards the specific details, they include a grey worsted three-piece suit, Longline draped jacket with black velvet half sleeves and collar, buttons covered in velvet, pocket flaps, as well as welted seams on the chest pocket. Waistcoat with black velvet-covered buttons, and trouser that was pleated (Victoria & Albert, n.d.).

In accordance with the background of the Teddy boy, its correlation between this group and the Edwardian suit will be the Trickle up theory's evidence, as demonstrated by Jackson, T. and Shaw, D (2006). Regardless of the considerable alterations in the manner in which the fashion is produced, the theory that serves as the basis of creating fashion, and the upper class of the society, which a style is designed by a fashion designer and portrayed by a fashion leader, and that it is therefore beneficial to the set of people belonging to the lower class in the society, whereby it is produced once again and promoted, still maintains value. Simply put, it is feasible for fashion to become disseminated from elites to the middle class and eventually to the poorer class in society.

Moreover, an attribute of an upper class is the Edwardian style suit from the earlier cited example. Meanwhile, Mitchell (2019) further stated that this style is already altered by Teddy boys, where they included laces and similar to Mississippi gamblers, by adorning dazzlingly pink or green socks and wearing crepe shoes known as "brothel crawler." This phenomenon is in compliance with a concept stated by Bricolage, which is restructuring and re-contextualizing objects in conveying new meanings (Clarke, 1976, p. 177). Furthermore, he equally suggested that this motif is stated to resonate with the group situated social connection in the united group as a stylish symbolic bricolage that conveyed a solidity, masculinity, as well as working-class representations.

Nevertheless, there has been a correlation between the Teddy boy and masculinity of blue-collar workers intricately in the historical context, which contradicts the previously stated Victorian and dandy cultures, whereby masculinity is perceived by the male as an expendable component of the middle and upper class in popular culture. This could be due to the emerging subculture in the 1950s. It was contended by Crowley (2020, p. 51) that Teddy Boys' activism could be considered as revealing two developments in the British social life during the 1950s, the struggle encountered by young skilled workforces occupying the base of the social hierarchy. Simply put, Teddy Boys denote a set of individuals that are marginalized in the society or received insignificant respect and thus are classified under non-popular masculinity.

Moreover, it has already been clarified by Craik (1994, p. 170) that since the 19th century, normative men have either resisted this type of rule or conformed to the dominant element. Contrastingly, masculine fashion is now solitarily attributed to particular groups such as homosexuals, popular stars, as well as prominent subcultural groups. It is implied that the above-stated groups are non-normative, however, an apparent reflection of non-popular types of masculinity. As regards their choices of clothing, these non-normative types of 'masculinities' usually incite a parody of mainstream masculine practices, which could be readily observed from the example of the Edwardian style Teddy Boy attire.

Summarily, novel cultures are more represented symbolically by Teddy Boys, whereby young workforces at the lower class developed masculinity as a tool for opposing the popular culture that marginalized them. The aim of

these young men is to be accepted socially by the culture that rendered them submissive, while attempting to position themselves in the modern class structure of social mobility as groups without class, instead of being an upper and middle class, and even though they denote a form of masculinity, they remain a set of workers that are not acknowledged in the mainstream society or have less social acceptance compared to men belonging to the upper and middle classes.

## 6. Conclusion

To conclude, this section offers a chronological assessment of the various typical examples of clothes selected for evaluating the manner in which they symbolize masculinity, consolidated through certain evidence from history as regards written works. Firstly, on the basis of the first and second paragraphs, I have surmised that the macaroni clothing style, due to cross-cultural impacts, denotes the opposite of masculinity, and lacks positive impact or acknowledgment in the society. In spite of being widely disseminated across the United Kingdom. This is attributed to the fact that prior to the Victorian era, the excessively embellished and ostentatious design of this kind of apparel was adjudged disproportionately feminine.

In the third and fifth figure, the Victorian three-piece suit, as well as a female day dress from a similar period, whereby the male suit has been subjected to various alterations, initiating a contradiction with the first outfit. The surmise reached is that a deviation exists in the silhouette and meaning of men's clothing in the Victorian era, that is, the suits designed at that period symbolized the professional masculinity of the affluent and were utilized in demonstrating status in professional and social contexts, on the basis of the theory of the abandonment of machismo in the Figure 6 as well as a contrast of contemporaneous women's attires.

Lastly, following the presentation of the Edwardian context outline of the Figure 9, coupled with the evidence of Trickle up theory as observed by Jackson, T. and Shaw, D. (2006), it could be readily observed that the Teddy Boy costume in the Figure 8 depicts masculinity of the lower classes, corresponded with those that are marginalized in the society, and received insignificant respect, and low acknowledgment in the absence of the costumes mentioned previously. Even though the clothes' origin is from Edwardian upper-class clothes, the modified version of the Teddy Boy in the back is totally unrelated with the affluent groups, nonetheless is extremely intricately associated with lower blue-collar classes that failed to even be recognized in the mainstream. Thus, it could be surmised that the masculinity of the Teddy Boy costumes lies in the struggle of non-mainstream social groups to be acknowledged by mainstream society.

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