

Chanel's Ford: A Revolution of Women's Rights and Fashion

Hellen Jin

Princeton Day School

Abstract: *In the history of humanity, females have long been known as the “subordinate” gender to male. Even in the most liberated land of all---The United States of America--- women were denied basic citizen rights until the early 1900s. Numerous courageous women fought for their rights in the 1900s in the women's suffragist movement; the movement was marked by success after tireless protests were made by American women. In the year 2021, women are still fighting for equality in many areas of their lives, such as the workspace, healthcare, civil rights, and much more. A stereotype of delicacy and submissiveness has been deeply embedded into the definition of the word “woman” as women were always perceived to be weaker than men. A peculiar phenomenon occurs in the beauty and fashion industry: women are the dominant figures in the industry. In order to gain a more adequate understanding of the revolution of women's rights, we must not neglect the most important attributes in the fashion industry throughout the decades. The Little Black Dress undoubtedly is one of the most timeless and impactful designs in fashion history, and a deeper understanding of women's rights during the 1920s can be gained through the lens of a fashion phenomenon.*

Keywords: *American history, Fashion, Feminism, Revolution, Women.*

I. Introduction

“Dress shabbily and they remember the dress; dress impeccably and they remember the woman” (Chanel) is a famous quote stated by one of the most influential figures in women's fashion, Gabrielle “Coco” Chanel. Her design philosophy often presented the inseparable relationship between feminism and the fashion industry. The beauty industry during the 1920s remained relatively female dominated, and the emerging traces of women's rights defined beauty and fashion, fact that should not be neglected. The French designer Chanel was best known for her juxtaposition of feminine elegance and the shift away from stereotypical constraints on women's traditional apparels. Chanel's most classic design was the “Little Black Dress” which debuted in 1926 America through the notable fashion magazine, Vogue. The timeless design and contemporary features of the dress granted its long lasting legacy in the fashion industry. The dress's significance cannot be solely exemplified by its value of visual aesthetics, but rather, its value as a highly time-sensitive artwork that portrayed the time period and its aftermath with precision. The 1920s, more widely known as the “Roaring Twenties”, lived up to its extravagant nickname with both flourishing culture and a prospering economy; in particular, the evolution of women's fashion and rights remains a highlight of the 1920s. The “Little Black Dress” embodied the widely acknowledged flapper style from the 1920s, which allowed the women of the decade to break from conservative Victorian values as well as take a more active approach to their role in society.

II. 1920s America and Women's Rights

The 1920s, or the “Roaring Twenties”, is arguably one of the most revolutionary decades for the entertainment industry in 20th century America. Following the economic boom and the emergence of the “New Woman” ideals with the flapper lifestyle, women were perhaps the most impacted demographic of all. Women in America had been tirelessly advocating for their civil rights and raising their voice in political matters to combat the submissive ideologies surrounding them ever since the early 1800s; this memorable era of feminism witnessed the “Women's suffrage movement.” Women who participated in gatherings and protests were called the “suffragists” and they were often treated as a group of “cult members” who were destroying the “real morals of womanhood” (“Women's Suffrage”). The outspoken suffragists rejected the idea that women were expected to be submissive and pious. After years of fighting for their cause, the women's suffrage movement achieved victory in the 1920s when they were granted the right to vote. As women's social position improved, their

culture underwent an even more significant change. The birth of the term “new woman” in the 1920s, along with the development of the flapper culture, signified a brand new morale for women. The flappers were a generation of young women in the 1920s who embraced new feminine liberties through their open-minded approach to sexual expression through their appearance and actions. The most iconic legacy of the 1920s flapper was the vibrant drop-waisted dress that carried an ounce of feminism and an ounce of societal revolution.

III. Relationship Between Women's Rights And Fashion

The aftermath of World War I left a lasting legacy for American society as a whole to prosper and liberated women's morals and rights, greatly impacting their lifestyles in America. In order to adequately examine women's rights and lifestyle, the fashion industry must not be overlooked. Especially in the 1920s, the fashion and beauty industry remained relatively feminine, which was actively reflected in their lifestyles at the time. When the suffrage movement started gaining more attention, a new type of dress was highly popularized as a form of social activism and as an expression of their values. During the time, Amelia Bloomer's namesake suit - which featured a long-baggy design with basic colors - flourished. The significance of the suit's popularization had inseparable connections with the time period in which it was introduced. The ultimate goal of the women's suffrage movement was to spotlight the importance of female rights; therefore, extravagant costumes that accentuated women's bodies were considered a “distraction” to the original purpose of such a movement. (“1920-1929”) The muted colors and baggy design of Amelia Bloomer's dress rightfully lived up to the ideals of the movement.



Image 1: Suffragists wearing Amelia Bloomer's dress

As the women's suffrage movement marked its end following the birth of the “Roaring Twenties”, the idea of a bold and outspoken woman prospered. The 1920s welcomed a more androgynous style shortly after women set a milestone in their fight for gender equality by gaining voting rights. Not only did women become more politically active, but many of them also began to take on more “masculine” jobs in society. Following the Industrial Revolution in the “Roaring Twenties”, more women entered the workforce, working in places such as postal offices and factories. Astonishingly, women made up about twenty percent of the total labor force in America at the time. (“Roaring Twenties”) Working as factory workers, women discovered that convenient apparel became the “go-to” style. Similar to the flapper style dresses, the bodylines of women were not accentuated, allowing them to feel more liberated. Before the flapper dresses flourished among American women, the apparel that women were expected to wear were modest yet constraining. The traditional dresses usually covered every inch of the women's body from the neck down, while also preserving a woman's body curves through abnormally tight corsets. The tight corsets were not only feeding into unrealistic beauty standards, but were also very uncomfortable to move in. As the workforce showed an increase in the necessity of female workers, uncomfortable clothing pieces such as a tight corset were slowly eliminated to ensure work efficiency. The new era of comfortable clothing for women also allowed women of different body types to

freely express themselves without the fear of being rejected for unrealistic beauty standards. By understanding women's role in society, it can be inferred the type of fashion or lifestyle choices women made during a given time period. The popularization of the "Little Black Dress" was a fashion phenomenon that tied back to a story portrayed by the "Roaring Twenties"

IV. Significance of the Little Black Dress

A fashion phenomenon who gained women's attention in the 1920s was most definitely the French designer, Gabrielle "Coco" Chanel. In 1926, American Vogue debuted the first sketch of the Little Black Dress and described it as the "frock" for all to wear, namely distinguishing the timeless design as a "uniform" for women of all classes and appearances. Despite the undeniable fashion significance in the design of the "Little Black Dress", it is more correct to say that the design's historical significance was also a huge contribution to its everlasting legacy. Although the dress debuted in 1926, it was not until the early 1930s that the dress truly became an iconic fashion piece. The Great Depression began during the late 1920s and continued through the early 1930s, making Chanel's Little Black Dress a significant artifact to symbolize one of the biggest stock market crashes in the country. The Jazz Age and the liberating attitudes of the 1920s granted the fashion industry astonishing extravagance in women's dresses and jewelry. However, the stock market crash nevertheless limited the consumption of luxury goods, causing many people to spend their incomes only on bare necessities. One can only imagine the restraints on extravagant fashion for women during such desperate times. One of the many things that Chanel did right with her design was the simplicity of the dress, which attracted numerous women at the time. The theme of simplicity was prevalent in everyday life due to the economic constraints of the Depression, and the Little Black Dress accurately reflected the way of life for women during the era. It is important to note that the ideologies of life for a woman experienced a significant shift during the 1920s; the increased number of female workers in the labor force meant a desire for simplicity and comfort in clothing. In addition to the dress's simplicity, the materials used to make the dress were affordable; the materials used were simple textiles and fabrics that were economical and easily found in one's household. The very features of the classic Little Black Dress not only possessed its own fashion values, but also contained great historical significance as it rejected the traditional morals imposed on women.

V. Coco Chanel's Design Philosophy

The designer who left an undeniable legacy and revolutionized the fashion industry for women was Gabrielle "Coco" Chanel; much of her success could be explained by her design philosophies and values. In one of her interviews, Chanel stated, "Fashion should express the place, the moment" (Coco Chanel). In her mindset, a successful design should not merely be aesthetically pleasing but it should convey a story that is greater than the design. In that sense, the Little Black Dress depicted the new perspective of women during the 1920s. The Little Black Dress expressed the liberation of women's bodies, which closely correlated to the improvement of workplace equality. When asked why Chanel decided to maintain simplicity in her design of the Little Black Dress, she answered, "The richer the dress, the poorer it becomes" (Chanel). The words "rich" and "poor" do not literally translate into the measure of one's wealth, but rather the prevalence of the dress. A "rich" dress can be defined as a piece of apparel that is luxurious and extravagant in terms of its accessories. In Chanel's words, the dress will get "poorer", meaning the lack of normality on everyday streets. The Little Black Dress opposed excess accessorizing, and its simplicity in terms of color and design defied a "rich" dress, ultimately allowing women of all socioeconomic classes to enjoy it freely. The black color of her timeless design also held significance: "Before me, no one would have dared to dress in black...A black so deep that once seen, it stays in the memory forever" (Chanel). The older generation in the 1920s practiced conservative Victorian values, blatantly resenting the nuanced ideals of the "new women". Interestingly, the color black strictly symbolized mourning in the Victorian era; hence, many women of the older generation avoided including the color in their wardrobes. It is not wrong to say that Chanel's Little Black Dress revolutionized the public perception of the color black just like how the "new women" of the 1920s revolutionized a brand new era for women's rights. The avoidance of flashy colors in the design also signified the fact that women were capable of expressing their beauty even with the dullest of colors. Chanel's design philosophies were closely related to why the dress flourished. She was able to present and revolutionize the status of women in society through a simple black dress that many would think too mundane.

VI. The Impacts Of The Little Black Dress

Chanel's continued success in the female fashion industry proved that she was not a "one hit wonder" with her Little Black Dress. The dress shocked the whole nation when it first debuted in Vogue magazine, and it most certainly became a great precedent in the fashion world for iconic designers yet to come. The exact words in the Vogue magazine while debuting the sketch of Chanel's Little Black Dress were, "The Chanel 'Ford' Dress, the frock that all the world will wear" (1926, Vogue). Even before its debut, fashion editors predicted that the dress would serve as a uniform for all women due to its excellence in design and its comfort. It was described as "The Chanel 'Ford' Dress" because the Ford Model T, a popular and affordable automobile, flourished among Americans in the early 20th century ("Little Black Dress"); the Little Black Dress would similarly become the Ford Model T of the fashion industry. The Little Black Dress has continued serving as a precedent for designers throughout the twentieth century and even until the present .



Image 2: Audrey Hepburn in Givenchy's Little Black Dress

A great designer, Hubert De Givenchy is best known for his remake of Chanel's Little Black Dress in the 1950s. The world renowned movie, *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, starred the Hollywood star Audrey Hepburn wearing Givenchy's dress. The dress on Audrey Hepburn in the movie created an iconic look in both the film and fashion industry. The look was more feminine than Chanel's Little Black Dress; Givenchy designed a tighter waist line for the dress to look more playful as the women of the 1950s were depicted as positive and vibrant. Givenchy's version of the Little Black Dress established a new era of the Little Black Dress: the cocktail black dress.



Image 3: Christian Dior's Little Black Dress

Following the success of Givenchy's cocktail version of the Little Black Dress, Christian Dior released his interpretation of the design in the 1960s. Dior's dress amplified feminine curves, and the straight cut right above the chest area showed a new revolution in women's rights. The dress was much less modest than its predecessors. By the 1960s, women's freedom was established through their resentment of a conservative attitude. Although it created unrealistic beauty standards for women of all ages, the fashion industry granted many women the opportunity to pursue beauty in their lives. The long lasting legacy of Chanel's Little Black Dress was not merely the fact that many great designers utilized the same ideas, but also how each and every piece of the remake of her Little Black Dress exemplified the lifestyle of women in a particular era.

VII. Conclusion

Even after almost a century of advocating for gender equality, the fight for women's rights is not yet over. Numerous historical events signifying the revolutionary era of feminism exist in textbooks and newspapers, but we often neglect different aspects of feminisms. The advocacy for women's rights does not end merely when words have been altered in papers, but rather it continues through the attempts at shifting the public perception of women. Allowing women to freely express themselves through clothings is not the same thing as showing respect towards the way women decide to present their bodies. Although the fashion industry might seem shallow to most, there is so much more to explore than just a few colors bombarding a piece of clothing. Significant feminist figures in history like Coco Chanel should be celebrated for opening a new door for women to express their bodily beauty through a more tolerable aspect. Chanel's "Little Black Dress" shied away from the beauty standards of body curves, while also allowing more women to freely exercise in such clothing. A small piece of clothing might seem powerless, but it is accurate to say that the "Little Black Dress" was an innovation that shifted the public's perception of feminism and gender equality.

Acknowledgements

I thank Ms. Hamilton, my 10th grade English teacher (Princeton Day School), and Ms. Bynum, my 10th grade American History teacher (Princeton Day School), for guiding me through the process of developing a clear thesis. I thank Ms. Matlack (Princeton Day School) for providing me with sources for research

References

- [1]. "1920-1929." Fashion History Timeline, 11 May 2018, fashionhistory.fitnyc.edu/1920-1929/.
- [2]. "Roaring Twenties." American History, ABC-CLIO, 2021, americanhistory.abc-clio.com/Topics/Display/1187231?cid=41&sid=1187231. Accessed 25 Apr. 2021.
- [3]. Corson, Grace. Harper's Bazaar. JSTOR, jstor.org/stable/10.2307/community.16502719. Accessed 3 May 2021.
- [4]. Gessner, Liz. "Little Black Dress." Encyclopedia of Clothing and Fashion, edited by Valerie Steele, vol. 2, Charles Scribner's Sons, 2005, pp. 358-360. Gale eBooks, link.gale.com/apps/doc/CX3427500371/GVRL?u=princeds_ca&sid=GVRL&xid=3b244c99. Accessed 3 May 2021.
- [5]. Mitchell, Rebecca N. "DEATH BECOMES HER: ON THE PROGRESSIVE POTENTIAL OF VICTORIAN MOURNING." Victorian Literature and Culture, vol. 41, no. 4, 2013, pp. 595–620., www.jstor.org/stable/24575727. Accessed 3 May 2021.
- [6]. Nast, Condé. "From the Archives: Honoring the Life of Coco Chanel." Vogue, Vogue, 1 Feb. 2017, www.vogue.com/article/from-the-archives-chanel-in-vogue.
- [7]. Whitfield, Kay, and Kay Whitfield. "Coco Chanel-The Little Black Dress." Classic Chicago Magazine, 25Oct.2020, www.classicchicagomagazine.com/coco-chanel-the-little-black-dress/#:~:text=American%20Vogue%20October%201926.,then%20a%20little%20black%20dress.
- [8]. "Inside CHANEL." Inside Chanel, inside.chanel.com/en/timeline/1926_the-little-black-dress.