

Article

Threads and Stitches of Self: The Reparative Power of Fashion and Clothing in *The Secret Lives of Dresses*

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Accepted version published on 5th August 2025

DOI <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.16745532>

Abstract: This study investigates the role of vintage dresses as agents of personal transformation and identity reformation in Erin McKean's novel *The Secret Lives of Dresses*. Utilizing Roland Barthes' semiotic framework alongside Jacques Lacan's theories of desire and identification, the analysis reveals garments as symbolic matrices in which memory, self-articulation, and emotional maturation converge. The protagonist gradually uncovers her identity through intimate encounters with the antique garments housed in her grandmother's boutique. Each dress, embedded with its archive of bygone lives, functions as a reflecting surface for Dora's concealed longings and her emergent, fluid self. The texture of fabric and the cut of seams, therefore, exceed the realm of the visual; they become vehicles of narrative and psychodynamic revelation. This paper contends that, in narrative form, dress is reconfigured from a simple ornamental covering to an active mechanism of self-reconstruction, evidencing clothing's potential to re-author identity from within the text.

Keywords: Fashion, Identity, Transformation, Semiotics, Psychoanalysis

Introduction: Understanding Fashion and the Power of Dresses

Fashion functions as a circulatory art form, revealing simultaneously who we have been and who we may yet become. It translates sensation, thought, and intent into fabric and form, allowing the self to speak in hues and stitches. Therefore, clothing must not be confined to the utilitarian functions of concealment or the decorative gloss of ornament; instead, it operates as a constellation of indications through which the individual is legibly, if not exhaustively, articulated. Its capacity to brand, deform, and reform the self endows it with a creative potency comparable to sculpture or music. Within its folds, the daily encounter with art is contained. Throughout the centuries, clothing has provoked and cradled imaginative labor, galvanizing creators to materialize and realize signature styles. Fashion, as such, exceeds the mere fabric we don; it weaves together visible Wilbur's skin, cultural memory, and the choreography of presentation, all conditioned by the archives of history, the rhythms of technology, the imperatives of politics, and the quiet revolutions of habit. Its domain is not restricted to couturiers of renown or markets of opulence; it thrives as much in the unstudied drape of a morning shirt as in a curatorial look. Through these daily negotiations, people inflect professional, ethical, and sociopolitical allegiances upon the surface of their attire.

Contemporary fashion functions as a fluid medium for individual expression. Designer Alexander McQueen noted in a 2009 interview with *The Cut* that "it's a new era in fashion—there are no rules. It is all about the individual and personal style, wearing high-end, low-end, classic labels, and up-and-coming designers all together" (McQueen). The field is widening its embrace of diverse body types, genders, complexions, and cultural heritages, mirroring a broader societal movement toward inclusive representation. The once rigid hierarchies of designer, haute couture, streetwear, and artisanal craft are dissolving, allowing for idiosyncratic, deliberate assemblages that signal both belonging and singularity.

While often perceived as purely visual and, at times, superficial, fashion is inescapably implicated in the shaping, preserving, and reframing of identity and collective memory. Within the landscape of literature, garments feature routinely as vehicles of revelation, elucidating character melancholy and personal metamorphosis. Costumes, dresses, and uniforms surpass their material substrate, operating instead as imprinted memoirs, emblems of transformation, and cartographies of life-course. Through the wearing and the remembering of specific fabrics, hues, and cuts, characters within the text negotiate both private recollection and public archive, making the wardrobe the silent yet eloquent text of the self.

Among garments, the dress occupies an irreplaceable niche, enfolding style, memory, and an almost archetypal grace within its seams. More than a cut of cloth, it becomes a vehicle for identity, for a mute yet vivid self-statement. Sleeves, hem, and neckline conspire to disclose our interiority—our present mood, our intended projection to the external world. From the voluminous silk of a ball gown to the unadorned cotton of a summer shift, each distinct form assembles its quiet narrative. Historically, the dress has emblematically punctuated life's transversal rites—birth, communion,

farewell—thus acting as a temporal bridge between celebration, metamorphosis, and incremental self-creation. Emotional resonance, moreover, bridges the corporeal and the mnemonic: the satin bodice of a first formal dance, the embroidered hem of a mother's wedding gown, the disused empire waist that recalls a summer's unplanned road trip. Regardless of fashion's mercurial dictates, the bond between wearer and garment transcends the observable; a dress may elicit poise, evanescent levity, aching memory, or merited defiance, depending on the woman's inward landscape. An heirloom discovered in a trunk or a bespoke garment anticipating a single fête, the dress remains an enduring mirror of taste, sentiment, and the unyielding grace that silence sometimes grants to the fabric itself.

This study analyzes how garments within *The Secret Lives of Dresses* become catalytic instruments for the protagonist Dora, enabling her to revise her identity through acts of symbolic appropriation. Employing Roland Barthes's semiotic apparatus alongside Jacques Lacan's formulations of desire and the process of identification, the argument posits that fashion serves dually as a narrative medium and a psychological reflective surface. Through her iterative interactions with the dresses, Dora reveals concealed dimensions of her subjectivity and reclaims authority over the unfolding story of her life.

Exploring *The Secret Lives of Dresses*

Erin McKean's *The Secret Lives of Dresses* invites us to trace the imaginative arc of Dora, a twenty-something woman drawn back to her hometown when a family emergency calls her to the bedside of her grandmother Mimi. Mimi runs a beloved vintage boutique whose stock is imbued with narrative. Each dress sold is accompanied by a handwritten "Secret Life" that recounts a fictive, yet oddly persuasive, history of the garment. As Dora helps her grandmother recuperate, she begins to slip into the shop's wares, and the frocks—satin, taffeta, beaded—suture her present self to a past whose seams were long overlooked. Each dress silently alters her posture, her vocabulary, her conception of womanhood, so that the novel becomes a meditation on how objects redraft the self. McKean's playful, jewel-toned language glides with the ease of a vintage belt drawn snugly over a waist; she mingles wistful memory with the brisk rhythms of chick lit, suggesting that memory and garment may, like empire waists and lurid florals, cinch the body into narrative shape. The brisk interplay of past and present, garment and wearer, affirms that identity is not merely adopted but quietly rewritten, one hem at a time.

In *The Secret Lives of Dresses*, every gown transcends its materiality to become an emblem chronicling individual and collective experience. Draped upon a mannequin, a dress silently narrates the quiet dramas of its previous selves, bearing the weight of social change, communal memory, and fragile emotion. Housed in a vintage emporium, each piece of cloth is steeped in biography, a biography given articulate breath by the fictional fragments penned by Mimi, Dora's grandmother. The dresses thus mutate into articulate relics: talismans of identity, indices of recollection, and catalysts for metamorphosis. They are numbered markers along the emotional cartography of the women who donned them, signposting episodes of tenderness,

bereavement, valour, and nascent self-recognition. Consequently, each garment becomes an emotional artefact, reverently passed from one matrilineal voice to another. The text invites readers to perceive vintage attire not as a monetary cost but as an ancestor's whisper, a conduit across temporal divides. As Dora forges an affinity with these material witnesses, she deciphers the contours of her name, her familial legacies, and the emergent arc of her becoming. The dresses thus function as temporal archipelagoes, binding yesteryear to today's inquiry, and affording memory, consolation, and a subtle cartographic sense of home. They are, in the final estimation, not mere style, but ancestral baubles of lived history stitched into the grain.

Theoretical Framework

Investigating how fashion serves as a catalyst for persona metamorphosis and identity re-scripting in *The Secret Lives of Dresses* requires a close reading of the latent symbolic and psychodynamic functions embedded in garments. Dora's encounters with the dresses, far from being superficial for their colour and cut, unfold as a dense semiotic play infused with unfulfilled wishes. The present analysis draws upon a tripartite conjunction of Barthesian semiotic thought, Lacanian readings of desire and identification, and Winograd's linguistic model of cohort reference. Barthes frames clothing as a polysemous arrangement of signifiers, whose permutations index, distil, and ultimately re-generate the subject. Lacan, conversely, situates the dress as a specular surface upon which concealed wishes and the eucharistic foreshadowing of a whole self are ceaselessly re-applied and occluded. Winograd reinforces this reading by demonstrating how cohort indices in vernacular dress-disclosure create simultaneous mini-narratives of belonging and exclusion. Interweaving these three positions, the present inquiry will, thus, illuminate how Dora's changing semiotic engagement with frocks dramatizes a protracted psychodramatic and semiotic odyssey toward an emergent, albeit febrile, self.

Roland Barthes' Semiotic Theory: Fashion as a System of Signs

In *The Fashion System*, Roland Barthes advances an interpretation of fashion in which apparel is re-conceived not as a collection of consumable objects but as a reservoir of signification organized according to linguistic principles. For him, a trio of signifier, signified, and sign is recast in the milieu of dress so that stitches, weaves, and silhouettes are elevated to units of meaning that point to social hierarchies, collective traditions, and personal ambitions. He insists that spectacle and notation are inseparable: "Fashion is not simply a function of clothing, but of discourse: it is the clothing written or read according to a system of signs" (Barthes 10). Barthes identifies a dual register: the image-clothing, which commands the eye in editorial and display contexts, and the written-clothing, which is articulated in magazines, criticism, and treatises. Fashion, then, functions as a social script in which individuals compose or recompose identity by choosing, altering, and circulating predetermined signs, thereby interpreting the lexicon while remaining cognizant of its coded nature.

Jacques Lacan: Theory of Desire and Identification

Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic framework locates the mirror stage at the threshold of self-recognition, marking an encounter that, though ostensibly banal, inscribes the first, pivotal fracture between organism and subject. When the infant perceives its reflection for the first time, the image appears as a coherent totality, a mirror-fixed Gestalt that exceeds the infant's actual motility and libidinal disarray. The infant experiences the image as an illusory mastery that it can spectate but cannot bodily repeat. This investment in the image, Lacan contends, engenders the ego as a misrecognition, a posited self conferred by the Other and thus inevitably foreign (Lacan 1). Identity, accordingly, is a perpetual deferral predicated on the anticipation of an ever-receding model; desire is thus structured by the interdict of the Other's gaze. Lacan's dictum, "the desire of the man is the desire of the Other," encapsulates the paradox: the subject's yearning engenders itself, conversely, in its concealed demand to be appropriated by a gaze that twice disavows its founding presence.

Fashion as a Medium of Personal Transformation

In *The Secret Lives of Dresses*, personal transformation is articulated through the protagonist Dora's progressive emotional and psychological reconsolidation. The narrative opens with feelings of a young woman trapped in a haze of apathy and circumstantial drift: she neglects her university studies, maintains tenuous ties with her family, and registers the world with muted affect. Fashion, during these opening movements, occupies the same latent register, comprising a bare minimum of clothes that physically conceal her yet do not press upon, shape, or define her disorientation. The change catalyzes when Dora returns to a small Southern town to assist an ailing grandmother and is handed the operation of a small vintage boutique. Walls, shelves, and mirrors constructed of memory and plastered with narrative lace admit her to another time, the time of women whose secrets, regrets, and small triumphs stain the silk. As she encounters, tries on, and pairs these vintage garments, Dora learns to 'read' them: the snug waist reminds her of a grandmother's hourglass, the moth-eaten hem of a cousin's room she could never enter. Such encounters function not merely as material exchange, but as affective re-education; the boutique shifts, therefore, from a mere commercial space to a domestic alchemy where the disembodied returns to the body and the indifferent reconceives itself as the agentive. Through this chrysalis of cloth and memory, Dora's pivot from confusion to articulated self is rendered neither sentimental nor magical, but textured, layered, and decidedly garment-sized.

Analysis

Roland Barthes, in *The Fashion System*, conceptualises fashion as a structured matrix of signs, positing that attire conveys. Modal units of representation that surpass purely aesthetic valuation. He distinguishes between three strata of the garment: the garment in its materiality, the garment in its photographic or visual apprehension, and the garment in the discursive and documentary contexts that articulate its significance. These strata interact cumulatively to produce multiple sedimentations of meaning (Barthes 5). Fashion, therefore, is not a heterogeneous collection of objects but a

signifying totality in which each dress denotes prevailing social values, emotive conditions, and loci of identity. Barthes affirms, "Fashion is not simply a collection of garments; it is a language through which meanings are communicated" (Barthes 10).

This theoretical framework illuminates the mechanism by which Dora's metamorphosis is instigated: her acquired capacity to decipher the symbolic codes that saturate the dress. The garments, and especially those inscribed with Mimi's fictional narratives, present themselves to Dora as polysemous texts. Imbued with emotional resonance and contextual weight, the dresses articulate love, mourning, bravery, and festivity in a single weave. As Dora confronts and interprets these signifiers, she is compelled to reconsider her affective landscape, her relational networks, and her nascent identity. The effect is vividly registered in her declaration, "It was the kind of dress that made you want to believe in yourself" (McKean 72). Here, the dress's symbolic efficacy directly coalesces with her self-perception, indicating the transformative power of reading fashion as a referential and self-referential discourse.

The woman's relationship to the dress exceeds the material: it becomes a living emblem, a mental architecture in which she erects a new self, one whose worth she can actively name. The moment she dons the garment, she shifts from the peripheral margins of her own life into a space where her creativity and her worth cohere. The dress thus inaugurates, however modestly, a movement from passive observation to the posture of agent, capable of insisting that her presence matters.

Lacan deepens the reading of this moment through the mirror stage, whereby identity is constructed not through clarification but through a serendipitous misrecognition. The newborn, encountering its reflection, momentarily misidentifies the mirrored surface as a completed and potent self, despite the body's lived disunity. The ego is thereby scripted, but the operation is double-edged: the image emits a beckoning and a wounding. The subject is bestowed a name yet immediately haunted by the gap: the mirror version is a shimmering, unreachable image that the subject can admire, yearn for, but never incorporate. This oscillation between triumphant recognition and exfoliating lack then shapes the ontology of identity, and it helps explain the dress's catalytic import.

Lacan elucidates that desire is always a desire for the Other: we yearn for that which we imagine is absent within us, and this yearning constitutes the very framework of our identity (Lacan 5). Dora's metamorphosis exemplifies this dynamic. The gowns she encounters in the boutique function as reflective surfaces, mirroring the feminine completeness, courage, and wholeness she perceives as unattainable. Her yearning, therefore, is not for the cloth and thread themselves but for the idealised selves they signify, selves she longs to embody.

Identity Reconstruction through Clothing

Through the act of picturing herself within the life each dress suggests, Dora acknowledges her emotional lack and, in the same stroke, begins to weave a more integrated self. The shift is apparent when she observes, "It was not a dress I would have picked for myself, but somehow it felt right" (McKean 97). This utterance marks

the inception of her change: she ceases to dress for the gaze of others and begins to attune her choices to an emergent, authentic self that is, paradoxically, both new and already recognisable to her.

Personal transformation pertains to Dora's inner cultivation, whereas identity reconstruction pertains to her deliberate efforts to recompose her self-presentation. This reconstruction proceeds from her acceptance of responsibility, her recognition of her grandmother's bequest, and her decision to remain and manage the boutique. Initially, Dora's identity is tentative and imposed from the outside; she appears to the world as a drifter lacking ardour or trajectory. However, through her involvement with the boutique and its garments, she starts to curate her own identity, deploying clothing as a symbolic lexicon and a temporal narrative.

The novel avers that such reconstruction is neither instantaneous nor violent; it unfolds as a stepwise reappropriation of space, voice, and significance. By learning to narrate the dresses and to engage meaningfully with visitors, Dora discovers novel paths of connection both to herself and to others. Fashion, under this conception, functions as both a performative ritual and a creative enterprise, affording her the means to reverence the past while daring the future.

Analysis

Roland Barthes' analysis in *The Fashion System* elucidates how the processes of sartorial signification allow identity to be performed and reconfigured. Barthes insists that clothing transcends mere utility, operating instead as a signifier-altered within a vast, signifying system. He states emphatically that "The garment becomes meaningful not in its material form alone but through the cultural and social messages it conveys" (Barthes 10). For Dora, each vintage frock within the boutique transcends mere fabric to assume the stature of a symbolically charged artefact, saturated with trace narratives and emotional residue. These garments, in turn, are escorted by fictional secret lives, concocted by Mimi, which Barthes would designate as the "written garment"—a supplemental layer of diegetic signification that confers upon each piece a potency to delineate identity. As Dora confronts the collated stories and the dresses, she re-encounters clothing not as a decorative veneer but as an intensified mode of self-assertion. This interpretive act coincides with her active identity restoration, for she labors to author a new self through her negotiation with the cultural, emotional, and diachronic sediment that the dresses contain. The acme of her transfiguration becomes evident in the reflective moment: "It was not a dress I would have picked for myself, but somehow it felt right" (McKean 97).

Barthes invites us to see fashion as a dramaturgical stage upon which subjects compose their narrative selves, selecting signs—garments, accessories, gestures—that encode values, affects, and social roles. Dora's intimate circling through the boutique—deliberating which dress to adopt, which to model, which ultimately to relinquish—performs the dialectic of self-invention, inscribing the folding silk and draping chiffon with new semiotic weight that the dressing and undressing body cumulatively authorises.

Lacan's psychoanalytic architecture deepens the inquiry. Identity, for Lacan, is perpetually unfixed, scaffolding itself upon the illusion of the united reflection encountered during the mirror stage, when the subject hails the image and mistakenly receives it as plenitude. Dora's arc maps this itinerary. At the novel's outset, her sense of disunity drives her not toward the dresses as physical garments, but toward the ideal silhouettes they promise—phantasms of the self she yearns to inhabit. Lacan insists that "desire is the metonymy of the lack of being" (Lacan 287). Acquisition of the boutique is thus more than occupational succession; it is the bid for narrative sovereignty. Through the boutique, Dora silently assumes the twin roles of custodian and chronicler, transmuting her status from a mere puppet in other protagonists' fictions to the author of her own. The store, in this light, crystallises as a palimpsest where her identity is rewritten through signifying decisions intertwined with heritage and the slow labour of self-becoming.

Conclusion

In *The Secret Lives of Dresses*, Erin McKean mobilizes vintage fashion as a dynamic instrument of metamorphosis and identity reimagining. The narrative frames garments, especially the lovingly curated dresses, as more than material artifacts; they are animated vessels saturated with memory, affect, and modes of self-utterance. Dora's traversal from emotional disconnection and uncertainty to lucid self-knowledge and intentional direction demonstrates how apparel may serve as the very substance through which trauma is soothed, the self is uncovered, and the future is deliberately fashioned.

Seen through Barthes' semiotic analytics, the wardrobe operates as a semiotic grid that conveys identity, affect, and cultural lexicons. Each vintage dress, upon its rise into Dora's life, arrives with a vignette that contextualizes it, inviting her to interpret and to internalize the narrative it carries. Her gradual immersion into this archive of embroidered silk and chiffon signals an emerging capacity to read and re-script the signs. Consequently, the boutique metamorphoses into a variable memory bank where past lives, affects, and possible selves are tenderly curated, and where Dora initiates the decisive revision of her life script.

Jacques Lacan's articulation of desire and identification illuminates Dora's interaction with the dresses as a dialectical moment in self-formation. Each garment serves as a metaphorical mirror in which she contests the gap between her current self and a possible future self she both longs for and fears. Her yearning for the dresses transcends the indexical qualities of fabric and cut; it gestures toward the constitution of a self that she senses has already been lived in by forebears and by previous, unfulfilled versions of herself. In the act of trying on and caring for the dresses, Dora performs a subtle reclamation of agency: she authors, however tentatively, a self whose contours are stitched together from genealogical memory, tactile legacy, and a contemporary hunger for authenticity.

Clothing in the narrative cannot be isolated as a vector of ornamentation or mere taste. Instead, it operates as a liminal technology that sutures temporal and

psychological fractures, binding inherited history to emergent identity. Through its affective and semiotic registers, the wardrobe enables Dora to articulate and embody a dialectical relationship between the communal past and her singular present. *The Secret Lives of Dresses* thus posits that fabric, when layered with narrative, memory, and desire, transcends its materiality and becomes a dynamic agent of metamorphosis, facilitating not mere ornamentation but the deep, iterative work of belonging, healing, and self-actualization.

Author Contributions: All authors contributed equally to this work. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: The data sharing policy does not apply to this article.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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