# “Forgive my Hat” Clothing as a Condition of Narratability in the Modernist Short Stories of Katherine Mansfield

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**“Forgive my Hat”: Clothing as a Condition of Narratability in the Modernist Short Stories of Katherine Mansfield**

Whilst a women's hat was more likely to be linked to consumerism and fashion, as Diana Crane suggests, it was the man whose hat bore the marker of familial social standing. Being hatless in the street and removing one's hat at work was not *de rigueur*.[1] Whilst Crane writes from a purely anthropological point of view, Clare Nicklas examines the role of the hat in the literature of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as an implicit indicator of social propriety:

> Authors assumed that readers knew the regions where hats should and should not be worn. Rather than explicitly describing female characters passing between public outdoor and more private indoor spaces, authors often indicated or emphasised their movement by referring to the taking off or putting on of hats.[2]

*Katherine*

Mansfield uses hats in her writing, as in her life as a New Woman, to make a point. As far as she was concerned, she was a professional writer, and elbowed herself sharply into the serious space hitherto occupied by men. As one friend recalls, she 'would flounce into a restaurant and sweep her wide black hat from her bobbed head and hang it among the men's hats on the rack.'[3]

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[1] Diana Crane, 'The Social Meanings Of Hats And T-Shirts, Excerpted From Fashion And Its Social Agendas: Class, Gender, And Identity In Clothing', *University of Chicago Press* (2000) <https://press.uchicago.edu/Misc/Chicago/117987.html> [accessed 5 March 2021].

[2] Charlotte Nicklas, ''It Is The Hat That Matters The Most': Hats, Propriety And Fashion In British Fiction, 1890–1930', *Costume*, 51.1 (2017), 78-102 (p. 5) <https://doi.org/10.3366/cost.2017.0006> [accessed 4 March 2021].
'Authors such as Frances Hodgson Burnett, Dorothy Whipple, and Virginia Woolf used these accessories to explore social respectability and convention, the pleasures and challenges of following fashion, and consumption strategies among women.' Ibid. p. 2.

[3] Claire Tomalin, *Katherine Mansfield: A Secret Life* (London: Penguin, 1988), p. 113.
As retold by her friend Beatrice Campbell.

She has an obsessive over-devotion to the hat (Bill Brown calls this a 'fetishistic overvaluation or misappropriation.'[4]). Hats, and more widely, items of clothing, populate the pages of her short story collections. In her biography of Mansfield, Claire Tomalin notes that clothes and accessories carry symbolic meanings in Mansfield's writing, such as 'a muff, a fur, a hat, a lace handkerchief.'[5]

Not only does Mansfield use clothing and the hat to symbolize or comment upon social status and the adherence to social norms, but she also goes much further, using clothing in particularly interesting ways to create a stylistically Modernist narrative perspective. Mansfield 'recodes' the hat to fulfil a narrative function and 'cultural values become objectified in specific material forms. '[6] For the purposes of this essay, I shall draw upon examples from three short stories: 'The Garden Party', 'Miss Brill' and 'Bank Holiday',[7] alongside an early short story published in Rhyt[Ital.]Magazine under the pseudonym Lili Heron, 'How Pearl Button Was Kidnapped'.[8]

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[4] Bill Brown, 'The Secret Life Of Things (Virginia Woolf And The Matter of Modernism)' *Modernism/Modernity*, 6.2 (1999), 1-28 (p. 1) Project MUSE, <doi:10.1353/mod.1999.0013>.
This article signposts wider study on the material object ('thing'), both in philosophical and psychological discourse. Brown focuses on Virginia Woolf and her use of material objects in her writing, how they 'characterize those who possess them' and, in Virginia Woolf's words: we are 'surrounded by objects which perpetually express the oddity of our own temperaments and enforce the memories of our own experience.' Ibid. p. 12-13.
The title of my essay is taken from Brown: 'Material objects seem a condition of narratability' Ibid. p. 12.

[5] Tomalin, *Katherine Mansfield: A Secret Life*, p. 201.
Tomalin also compares this use of objects with Virginia Woolf, with Woolf favouring books and paintings to clothing and ephemera.

[6] Brown, 'The Secret Life Of Things', p. 1.

[7] Katherine Mansfield, *The Garden Party And Other Stories* (London: Penguin, 1997).

[8] Lili Heron, 'How Pearl Button Was Kidnapped', *Rhythm*, 2.8 (1912), 18-21 <https://modjourn.org/issue/bdr432844> [accessed 10 March, 2021].

The most widely critiqued hat in Mansfield's writing is arguably the one given to Laura Sheridan by her mother in *'The Garden Party'*. Karen Shaup labels Laura's hat as a symbol of bourgeois consumerism.[9] Indeed, 'The Garden Party' is laden with overconsumption - from a surfeit of lilies and roses, the extravagance of a cream puff right after breakfast and a basketful of leftovers. Laura's mother, originally having bought the hat for herself, can afford to discard it, declaiming it as 'much too young'[10] for her, and an easy sacrifice to distract her daughter from unbecoming anxiety upon learning of the death of the working-class man near their house.

Laura's hat is, for Don.W.Kleine, a symbol of Laura's move from child to adulthood.[11] Catching sight of herself in the mirror, she sees her other, adult self. The hat allows her to temporarily satisfy her desire for experience, according to Kleine, and put aside her reservations about the party:

> Just for a moment she had another glimpse of that poor woman and those little children, and the body being carried into the house. But it all seemed blurred, unreal, like a picture in the newspaper. I'll remember it again after the party's over, she decided. And somehow that seemed quite the best plan… (47)

Arguably, although Laura's hat makes her seem more grown up, to herself and others, she is not ready to take on all that goes with the responsibility of adulthood. Her misgivings - 'to take scraps from their party. Would the poor woman really like that?' (49) - show that she is questioning the assumption that their charity would be well-received and is thus questioning

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[9] Karen L. Shaup, 'Consuming Beauty: Aesthetic Experience In Katherine Mansfield's 'The Garden Party'', *Papers On Language & Literature*, 51.3 (2015), 221-243 < https://whel-primo.hosted.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/f/6s7mjt/TN_cdi_proquest_journals_1708146300 > [accessed 17 March 2021].

[10] Mansfield, *The Garden Party,* p. 46. All subsequent quotation noted in text.

[11] Don W. Kleine, ''The Garden Party': A Portrait Of The Artist', *Criticism*, 5.4 (1963), 360–371 <https:// www.jstor.org/stable/41938365> [accessed 17 March 2021].

societal norms. Is Laura apologizing for what Andrew Martin calls a lack of 'sociomisery', a lack of sympathy and shared sorrow, for which the dress and hat are emblematic?[12] Whether her apology is general or personal is open to interpretation. Her apology may also give voice to her developing awareness and personal moral code; she is questioning her own judgment, which is not yet fully formed.

Mansfield uses the description of the physical object or physical characteristic to replace the narrator and to give us an insight into Laura's consciousness, and furthermore, the reader experiences the same journey as Laura and may well arrive at a destination of sorts ahead of her, in so far as the Modernist author has a destination in mind. On arrival at the dead carter's house, Laura is self-aware enough to realise that she is out of place, but cannot engage emotionally with the experience, nor can she take up the stance of bourgeois philanthropist as perhaps her mother would have done. She is only able to recognise grief in physical, not emotional, terms, referring to the strange 'oily' voices of the women and their 'terrible', 'puffy', 'swollen' appearance (50). The physical aspects of herself, such as her hat and her dress, therefore, are what she apologises for as she leaves the room.

Shaup interprets the apology as a rejection of her family's materialism.[13] It is noteworthy, however, that Laura does not take off the hat or discard it, even if she regrets its connotations. It may be that she wishes to make her own path through life, perhaps as a New Woman who

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[12] Andrew Martin, 'Putting On A Hat For 'The Garden Party: Sympathy And Societal Roles In This Short Story', *Those Passions Read* (2015) <https://thosepassionsread.wordpress.com/2015/04/27/putting-on-a-hat-for-the-garden-party-sympathy-and-societal-roles-in-this-short-story> [accessed 4 March 2021].
[13] Shaup, 'Consuming Beauty'.

makes her own choices not driven by social norms.[14] Putting on the hat temporarily masks her immaturity and makes her believe she, too, can live happily in her environs, even if 'she seemed to be different to them all' (49).

Shaup also draws attention to the film set qualities of the story. The scene is glorious technicolour, with costume playing an important role in the imagined drama of the Sheridan women. Jose 'loved giving orders to the servants, and they loved obeying her. She always made them feel they were taking part in some drama' (42). Her sister Meg, meanwhile, lounged around in a turban and Jose had breakfasted in her kimono and silk petticoat. This could be read as a criticism of the consumerism of the upper classes - if indeed Mansfield was intent on parodying herself.

Just as Laura moves forward into centre-stage in 'The Garden Party' by putting on her hat, thereby receiving compliments and unusual attention, Mansfield exploited her own sense of drama and aesthetic possibility to place herself in her own tableau vivant. Lawrence Mitchell draws upon several examples of this in written accounts by friends of Mansfield.[15] Virginia Woolf and William Orton both recall visiting Mansfield in her rooms, to find her centre-stage in her kimono, surrounded by carefully arranged objects. Francis Carco recounts

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[14]The hat Mansfield chose to wear when greeting her mother from the boat from New Zealand is an example of Mansfield herself striking out against convention:

> She met the boat-train in a newly bought large black straw hat; Mrs Beauchamp looked disdainfully at her, carried her off to her hotel in Manchester Street, and consigned the hat to the chamber-maid.

Tomalin, *Katherine Mansfield: A Secret Life*, p. 67.

[15] Lawrence J. Mitchell, 'Katherine Mansfield And The Aesthetic Object', *Journal of New Zealand Literature: JNZL*, 22 (2004), 31–54 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20112368> [accessed 22 March 2021].

in his autobiography that 'she felt a tenderness towards the most ordinary of everyday objects.'[16]

This ability of the Modernist, stream-of-consciousness writer to place the everyday object centre-stage has been explored by Aimee Gasston.[17] According to Gasston, the concise form of the short story allows emphasis to be placed on the objects in the external world of the character, affording agency and allowing the object to inhabit the human sphere. A strong example of this is the fox-fur in 'Miss Brill':

> The box that the fur came out of was on the bed. She unclasped the necklet quickly; quickly, without looking, laid it inside. But when she put the lid on she thought she heard something crying. (114)

Miss Brill demonstrates a certain weariness on her way home after her Sunday outing – the lack of enthusiasm for her habitual honey-cake our only indication that she is aware of and hurt by the comments directed at her. She seems to contemplate this, but not reach a conclusion. The 'vivification of the insensate',[18] as Gasston puts it, allows the reader to enter the consciousness of Miss Brill. The consciousness of its owner is either being transferred onto the fur necklet, or it displays its own emotions as an animated being, more than just a prop in

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[16] My translation into English of 'elle eprouvait une tendresse pour les choses quotidiennes les plus humbles.' Ibid. p. 31.
[17] Aimee Gasston, 'Phenomenology Begins At Home: The Presence of Things In The Short Fiction Of Katherine Mansfield and Virginia Woolf', *Journal of New Zealand Literature*, 32.2 (2014), 31–51 <https://whel-primo.hosted.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/f/6s7mjt/TN_cdi_proquest_journals_1673465115>
[18] Ibid. p. 37.

the drama but playing its own part.[19] Reminiscent of Laura in 'The Garden Party', Miss Brill does not seem able to fully comprehend her own emotions or the world around her, although she does not have the excuse of youth. Laura transfers her discomfort to her hat, Miss Brill her sadness to her fur. Miss Brill distances herself from her emotions as she distances herself from society:[5] She has a starring role in a play (so not in real life); she likes to listen to other's conversations (so is not engaging in conversation).

'As Miss Brill catalogues what she sees, she reduces and dehumanizes it,' writes Miriam Mandel.[20] Those around her remain faceless and are instead described by what they are wearing, either individually – 'he wearing a dreadful Panama hat and she button boots.' - or grouped according to common features: 'Little boys with big white silk bows under their chins, little girls like French dolls, dressed up in velvet and lace.' Some, even just classified by a single colour: 'Two young girls in red came by and two young soldiers in blue…' (111). 'Whatever Miss Brill sees, she reduces to the parameters of her own constricted world,' Mandel concludes. Symbolically, the fox-fur finishes the day constricted in its box, as Miss Brill finishes hers in her 'cupboard' of a room (114).

Mandel's article on Mansfield's use of reductive imagery inspired my own close reading of 'Bank Holiday', a short, curious tale with nine occurrences of hats and many more uses of clothing as the main character descriptor. Although I agree with Lorna Sage's description of

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[19] Another example of this occurs in the 'Daughters of The Late Colonel'. The daughters continue to hear their father's stick 'thumping' (57) after his death and feel that he is watching them from inside his chest of drawers and wardrobe, so much so that they lock the door and remove the key (59-60).

[20] Miriam B. Mandel, 1989. 'Reductive Imagery In 'Miss Brill'', *Studies in Short Fiction,* 26.4 (1989), 473-77 < https://whel-primo.hosted.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/f/mqg008/TN_cdi_proquest_journals_195697175>.

'Bank Holiday' as a 'post-impressionist word painting'[21], it might also be seen as the cinematographic: the camera pans across the view of a crowd, bringing a sense of movement to the opening tableau. As is a feature of Modernist writing, there is no single narrator or viewpoint – and no plot. Mansfield allows us to overhear snippets of conversation as each of her characters in this montage is illuminated.

As in 'Miss Brill', the characters are 'reduced' to what they are wearing. They are playing their part as extras in a film, with no central character or determined setting. The choice of the simple present tense consigns the opening tableau of musicians to replay this scene over and over, permanently fixed to Sage's painted canvas. The musicians are 'stout', 'little' and 'thin', but apart from that we know them only by their clothing. Mr 'Stout' wears 'dingy white flannel trousers, a blue coat with a pink handkerchief showing and a straw hat much too small for him, perched at the back of his head.' The flute player has no identity. He hides his face under a 'felt hat like a broken wing'. We are told they are 'unsmiling, but not serious' (which tells us nothing, really - a neutral expression), and they are left faceless; instead, we are granted a close-up of their hands, one highlighted by 'a brass-and-turquoise ring'. Even the music is described in terms of clothing, the fiddler drawing 'long, twisted, streaming ribbons' out of his instrument. (139)

Mansfield shows us a slice of society through the wardrobe[22] of her characters, and thus hints at their social status. We have the submissive Victorian stereotype: 'old fat women in velvet bodices', who she compares to 'dusty pincushions' (either because they are rounded, or that they let themselves be used to stick pins in, they are subservient and undynamic) and the thinner

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[21] Lorna Sage, 'Notes', in Mansfield, *The Garden Party,* pp. 154-159 (p. 159).

[22] Here, I use the term 'wardrobe' to include millinery, clothing, footwear and accessories such as jewellery and adornments.

woman with a more contemporary silhouette, described as 'worn umbrellas with a quivering bonnet on top.' Neither are favourable descriptions, but my guess is that Mansfield prefers the 'pin cushion' to the 'umbrella', as the latter are described as 'hags' and 'quivering' (139) which could refer to a more nervous or unpleasant disposition. The hats of the younger women 'might have grown on hedges' (139), which suggests they are from the lower classes, who, unable to afford the services of a milliner, would trim their own hats in the latest fashion, and their exuberance indicates a slightly overdone vulgarity. The babies in bonnets are wearing a feather.[23] Mansfield repeats 'streaming' to add a sense of movement to the scene (140), and to contrast with the 'ragged' (139) children, who are mostly static and overwhelmed. The stillness and colourless description of the children makes, to my mind, a statement about the poverty of the working classes.

Unlike in a plot driven narrative, the reader is left with no satisfying conclusion. This seemingly plotless short story does not even feature characters in the traditional sense. The scene is populated, and we can make assumptions about certain aspects of personality or lifestyle; we can imagine whatever backstory we chose and invent our own futures for them. In 'Miss Brill', the reader encounters much the same challenges, but in 'Bank Holiday' we do not have the luxury of a Miss Brill character, whose inner discourse and perceptions lead us to draw a conclusion of sorts about Miss Brill as a marginal figure. However, if we are to believe the author, who has been quoted as writing 'there mustn't be one single word out of place, or one

[23] Nicklas, 'It Is The Hat That Matters The Most'.
Nicklas offers an overview of the changing styles and fashion of the hat in different class groups. In particular, she refers to the trimming of hats. Wealthier women could afford to buy the latest designs, whereas the working classes tended to trim their own hats. Feathers and flowers were fashionable. A woman might copy the fashion of the Royal family, for instance, feathers becoming very popular after the Queen (Mary) was photographed wearing a headdress with pearls and a feather.

word that can be taken out'[24], then the ring on the finger of the flute player (or piper) in the opening tableau must be telling us something about its wearer. The gemstone in the ring could be read as holding a range of mythical properties ranging from immortality to good fortune, to wisdom and happiness.[25] That being determined, the musicians could be viewed as mythological, faceless figures. The ending is Hamlin-esque; I can almost hear the door in the mountain slamming shut behind them:

> Up, up they thrust into the light and heat, shouting, laughing, squealing, as though they were being pushed by something far below, and by the sun, far ahead of them – drawn up into the full, bright, dazzling radiance to…what? (142)

[24] Stephanie Forward, 'An Introduction To Katherine Mansfield's Short Stories', *Discovering Literature: 20th Century* (2016) <https://www.bl.uk/20th-century-literature/articles/an-introduction-to-katherine-mansfields-short-stories> [accessed 25 February 2021].

[25] American Gem Society, *Legends and Folklore of Turquoise* (2020) <https://www.americangemsociety.org/legends-and-folklore-of-turquoise/> [accessed 29 March 2021].

This very much depends which source you choose to believe. I found several websites claiming to uncover the meaning of turquoise. However, this was my best find as it comes with this disclaimer: *NOTE: The above is intended to educate on the myth, legend, and historical lore of turquoise and is not meant to be interpreted as fact.*

Faith Binckes suggests that Mansfield used the periodical *Rhythm* to experiment with different writing styles through the use of several pseudonyms.[26] 'How Pearl Button was Kidnapped' is one of three early stories that played with the setting of her native New Zealand.[27]

Clothing takes on a central, figurative role as the behaviours the characters display and the freedoms they enjoy (or are denied) is reflected in the way they are dressed.[28] The Maori attire is bright, colourful and unrestrictive, and they wear no shoes or stockings. The women wear pink handkerchiefs on their heads, and the men's heads are uncovered, in contrast to the men

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[26] Faith Binckes, *Katherine Mansfield and Rhythm Magazine* [video short talk] Available at: https://podcasts.ox.ac.uk/Katherine-mansfield-and-rhythm-magazine [accessed 10 March 2021].

[27] We know from Katherine Mansfield's journals that she visited a remote part of North Island in 1907 and was very taken with the Maori people she met. She writes about escaping from her camp through the 'frightful wire fence - which every time seemed to grow tighter and tighter' to visit the Maori village:

> 'I reached the whare and a little Maori girl and three boys sprang from nowhere, and waved and beckoned. At the door a beautiful old Maori woman sat cuddling a cat. She wore a white handkerchief round her black hair, and a vivid green and black check rug wrapped round her body. Under the rug I caught a glimpse of a very full blue print dress, worn native fashion, the skirt over the bodice.'

C.K. Stead, *The Letters And Journals Of Katherine Mansfield: A Selection,* (London: Allen Lane, 1977), p. 29.

[28] This is by no means the only example of clothing being used figuratively to symbolise supressed or subjugated behaviours, or the inverse. In 'At the Bay' *(The Garden Party and Other Stories),* Linda recalls meeting her husband, Stanley, as a young man, 'a very broad young man with bright ginger hair', his head 'uncovered'. The Stanley without the hat is the one she loves: 'Not the Stanley whom everyone saw, not the everyday one' (18-19). In 'The Stranger', Mr Hammond's emotions are quite clearly betrayed by his behaviour with his hat. He is excited to be seeing his wife after months apart. Mr Hammond takes off his hat when anticipating seeing his wife again as he prepares to board the ship – an outward signal of receptiveness and vulnerability (129). He takes it off again in the cabin: 'The strain was over. He felt he could have sat there for ever sighing his relief – the relief at being rid of that horrible tug, pull, grip on his heart' (132). In contrast to this, he 'seizes' his hat to reassert his authority when his wife goes to say farewell to the doctor, and he is suspicious. Janey, in contrast, has 'thrown back her veil', which suggests an openness towards the others on board. (132)

in Pearl Button's world. The warmth of the blankets the men wear around their shoulders symbolises the warmth that envelops Pearl Button. As the story progresses, the women free Pearl Button from her learnt inhibitions and stifling conventions by loosening her hair and removing her European-style pinafore, dress, shoes and stockings.[29] She plays freely in her petticoat, encouraged to experience the physical sensations of the natural world and an emotional attachment to other human beings.

The story concludes as shouting 'little blue men' carry her back to the implied rigidity of the House of Boxes, where ironing is always done on a Tuesday and children are frightened to soil their clothing.[30] Mansfield uses a reductive description of the policemen, referring to them by their uniforms and then just the colour of their uniforms, belittling them and the patriarchal Edwardian society they represent.

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[29] In New Zealand, middle class settlers dressed according to the fashions of London and Paris. This was adopted to a certain extent by the Maori, who mixed European and Maori styles.

Fiona McKergow, 'Clothes', *Te Ara-The Encyclopedia of New Zealand* (2013) <http://www.TeAra.govt.nzx/en/clothes> [accessed 30 March 2021].

[30] Bronwen Fetters discusses Mansfield's use of the gender marked colours of pink and blue in 'The Little Governess'. This could be applied to 'How Pearl Button Was Kidnapped'. Blue is a cold colour as well as the gender coded colour for the male, as pink is the gender coded colour for the female. The 'little blue men' contrast with the pink handkerchiefs of the smiling, affectionate Maori women. The significant role of colour in clothing could be developed further but goes beyond the scope of this essay.

Bronwen Fetters, 'Patriarchal Pink: Gender Signification In Katherine Mansfield's 'The Little Governess'', in *Katherine Mansfield And Psychology,* ed. by Clare Hanson, Gerri Kimber and Todd Martin (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), pp. 165-171.

Mansfield uses hats and clothing to fulfil a narrative function in the absence of an external, omniscient narrator. Modernist writers, such as Mansfield, used free indirect discourse to show the reader many points of view. Mansfield not only steps in and out of the consciousness of her characters using this technique, but also deploys the animation of the insensate, such as Miss Brill's fox-fur, in much the same way. Mansfield's characters are dehumanised and impersonalized through the use of clothing as the main character descriptor, which creates a sense of emotional distance. These faceless characters can be deployed to expose the attitudes of those looking on, including the reader, who must make sense of this condensed world with no guiding voice. This is evident in 'Bank Holiday', which seems to have more in common with visual art than the short story. Clothing creates a cast of non-characters in this non-narrative, but cleverly (and conversely), the clothing also adds movement and vibrancy.

By using clothing figuratively, Mansfield exploits the interaction between it and the wearer to reveal underlying behaviours or signal changes to their state of mind, as exemplified in Laura in 'The Garden Party' or Pearl Button. The meanings hidden beneath Laura's figurative hat have been much discussed and opinions differ among critics. Clearly, however, Mansfield goes beyond the use of the hat simply as a signifier of cultural value.

# “Forgive my Hat” Clothing as a Condition of Narratability in the Modernist Short Stories of Katherine Mansfield

GRADEMARK REPORT

FINAL GRADE

85 /100

GENERAL COMMENTS

## Instructor

An excellent and witty essay which develops a sophisticated and wide-ranging reading of KM thru the idea of the hat.

Your use of secondary reading, often with a lightness of touch underpinned by detailed footnotes, is particularly impressive.

You show well how hats, clothes and objects more generally perform a narrative function, or in some cases are used to problematise the usual understanding of what a narrative is or does.

You make good use of primary quotes. In the case of BH it might have been nice to see a little more reflection on what you think is happening at the end.

Is the desire to be a New Woman a means of escaping materiiasm?

Well written and presented.

PAGE 1

PAGE 2

**Text Comment.** Katherine

PAGE 3

QM **Ital.**
Italicize

PAGE 4

**Comment 1**

an adult self of a particular kind (like her mother?)

PAGE 5

PAGE 6

### Comment 2

Does the NW escape materialism/consumerism or simply desire it on other terms?

PAGE 7

### Comment 3

Affording agency to whom?

It might be a way of suggesting a lack of meaningful agency -- as you go on to show, I think

PAGE 8

**Text Comment.** s

PAGE 9

PAGE 10

PAGE 11

### Comment 4

a great way to end the section but what do you think then is being claimed here by KM?

PAGE 12

PAGE 13

PAGE 14