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Exploring The Femme Fatale: How Does the Little Black Dress Paint the Modern Female Persona?

Shirley Ren

Havergal College, Canada

ABSTRACT

Coco Chanel initially designed the iconic Little Black Dress in the 1920s, and the fashion industry has since reproduced and reinvented its characteristics. This paper aims to explore the nuances of how modern ideas of feminism interact with the femme fatale identity associated with the LBD through both affirmation and disagreement. I begin by establishing the traditional French roots of the femme fatale persona using literary work and appropriate cultural context. The LBD's evolution is then presented with an exhibition in the MoMA, and paired with Audrey Hepburn's American reinterpretation and Princess Diana's revenge dress. The classic painting the *Birth of Venus* and Plato's philosophies are used to explain the possible hypersexual direction of the evolution. The modern LBD is shown through a dress from the fashion chain *Aritzia,* which demonstrates current issues such as consumerism and objectification of the female body. This paper ultimately reveals how fashion can both mirror widespread cultural beliefs during its time, and provoke social change with its implications.

Introduction

In the 1961 film *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, protagonist Holly Golightly is the epitome of the charming and enigmatic femme fatale. Given her lowly regarded job as what author Truman Capote deems as an "American geisha" (Halford, 2009), Holly still holds herself with an utmost feminine elegance. In fact, it is difficult not to depict her without the iconic sleek updo, thick bedazzled necklace, and of course — the little black dress. Ever iconic as it may be controversial, the little black dress has since been seen as a staple of female iconography. Flaunted in classic film noir pieces, well-known fashion collections, and even earning its own subsection in my local vintage store– the LBD is engrained within European and western culture. Yet conflict and disagreement arises when older feminine classics catch up with the fast-paced and multifaceted modern feminist movements.

Figure 1. Audrey Hepburn as Holly Golightly in Breakfast at Tiffany's. From Christie's. (2016). Going Once: 250 Years of Culture, Taste and Collecting at Christie's. Phaidon Press.

Present feminist thinking can lead to a critical interrogation of this dress's ethical intentions. Britannica identifies some of the focuses of fourth wave feminism as empowerment, sexual harassment, and body shaming. Then, do smaller "slutty" dresses like the LBD oversexualize the female body? Does this feedback in turn lead to women only finding worth within their physical appearances, and therefore pressure them into using their bodies? Or perhaps is it more suggestive for the ever lustful male gaze? I plan to make an appeal for the absolute innocence of our beloved dress, a concept arguably far more spiritual than material, within the context of modern feminist critiques. Throughout this paper, the little black dress will be explored via a variety of unique frameworks, from the context of today's consumer-led society to Plato's inquiries back in 400 BCE.

Figure 2. The first Little Black Dress (October 1926) Illustrator unknown, Vogue

History of the Dress

What makes the little black dress distinctive is that it was one of the first articles of clothing represented in film and media that has carried with it a more complex female persona. It is only appropriate to look at the LBD's origins and history when studying it's relevance to current affairs. Coco Chanel released the first little black dress in 1926 in the midst of many shifts in the western presentation of women. In an era of flapper girls, performance, and material extravagance, the initial design of the beloved dress is no exception to this trend. The "unconventional cloth-like jersey" (Eschner, 2017) used by Chanel made for a loose, almost frail, silhouette allows the wearer to move as freely as they'd please. To dance wildly and free the wearers limbs of the stiff societal regiments and restraints. The flapper era bestowed the ability unto women of expressing themselves using their body, in ways traditional societal expectations did not allow.

Holly Golightly may not be the pinnacle of fourth wave feminist representation, yet her character reveals diversion from the passionless housewife trope. Hepburn's previous role as Ann in the 1953 film *Roman Holiday* is most well known for sporting a two pieced dress shirt and belted ankle lengthed skirt. Additionally, Ann's character is an innocent princess who had never experienced romance and requires being brought to safety by an older man. When Ann is compared to Holly, we can observe a shift in what mass audiences seek

to watch when it comes to the presentation of a woman. With this shift came a modification in the filmmakers' choice of clothing. This subtle development in Hepburn's acting career within a mere decade could also have been a key telling of the start of second-wave feminism in the United States. As feminist thinkers and scholars start shifting their focus to the deconstruction of gender roles and female liberation, opposed to suffrage, fashion starts moulding itself around female identity. Despite having been released three decades prior, the little black dress gained popularity in the mainstream American media during this time of post-war, radicalist, cultural unrest.

Figure 3. Photograph of Audrey Hepburn on the set of Roman Holiday. Uploaded May 12th, 2020. From https://photos.com/featured/audrey-hepburn-in-roman-holiday-bettmann.html

We also musn't overlook Coco Chanel's identity as a lady of Paris, and this rich "l'air de Paris" interwoven into her design. Paris has been regarded as a city of splendour and excess ever since the early 17th century when the Paris press was born— fostering an ultimately ideal environment for the modern consumer. French author Jean-Louis Harouel characterizes this atmosphere as "the humanist conception of culture" having been "attributed a superior value" outside of mere commerce purposes (Rocamora, 2009, p. 67). In addition to what may appear to be a national propaganda feeding the growth of a French market, many scholars have associated these transcendental characteristics with the different people inhabiting the space. In his poem titled *A une Passante*, French novelist Charles Baudelair identifies the female passer as the Parisian 'passante'. She carries a poignant beauty, subtly signalling men that she is "[t]all, slender, in deep mourning, majestic grief" (Baudelaire 1991 [1860]). She walks briskly as to "fend off obtrusive gazes" and to show she is only a product of the fast moving city lifestyle. She "stand[s] as a sign of modernity, power and independence, qualities la passante in her status as a Parisienne figure grants her" (Rocamora, 2009, p. 135).

The Woman Behind the Dress

If this female passer by character is already established, who exactly is her audience and how exactly do they interact with her? On one hand, one could argue that the passante is created from the female gaze for the female gaze. Especially since this maneater of a character was popularized in the era of the magazine, a unique space at the time curated for women, by women, and read by women. From this perspective, she is who any female consumer should adore and attempt to copy, yet she'll know she will never be her. The concept of a male gaze also enters here, as some may also find it necessary to bring up how a lot of these female directed magazines profit off the selling point of certain items being attractive to men (Rocamora, 2009). If a woman flipped through the pages of Vogue and were to find a lovely black gown and felt prompted to purchase it, would it truly be a purchase of her own free will, or more of a ploy to try to look good for her husband for dinner that evening? This century long argument of what free will entails is especially relevant to what fashion a woman sports, as her intentions may drastically change the fundamental meanings of her dress. The psychology of the female psyche is too complex to fit into one narrative. Who's to say whether I'm wearing my favourite dress to impress yearning men on the streets, or to feel genuinely comfortable about my appearance for once?

Though even as the brisk, passer-by woman walks through crowded city streets, she catches glimpses of her reflection on storefront windows and shiny car bumpers. When she crosses the street to meet up with her date, it is again her own reflection she sees as she makes contact with his dark eyes. Therein exists a perhaps less than ethical desire of the young girl to catch the eye of a man passing by. Despite whether such as desire is the woman's free will or developed through exposure to a male dominant society— there is no doubt this perspective is still alive and well within the modern woman's judgement. And all these flawed sentiments may even find themselves manifested within the little black dress's design. The modern little black dress can act as a vessel to play with a 'meta,' self aware notion of the seductive femme fatale persona. The modern woman's psyche is not free, and may not ever be free, to the same patriarchal norms that the budding Parisian fashion designer felt in the 20s. Therefore, to suppress these feelings is to disregard the existence of oppression as a whole and assuming the privilege to live in a post-feminist society. The wearer of the little black dress is aware of the fact that the male gaze starts ingraining into the minds of preteens today, and that as much as her haughty husband gets on her nerves, she'll somehow still want to impress him.

Figure 4. Princess Diana's Revenge Dress. (1994). From https://people.com/royals/princess-diana-revenge-dress-true-story/

I'd argue that Princess Diana channels this conscious persona while she flaunted her infamous revenge dress on a day in late June of 1994. Following his separation from Princess Diana in 1991, Prince Charles publicly confessed his disloyalty to her during their marriage on the same night this dress was worn (Lewis, 2023). With a tight and revealing bust hugging an hourglass silhouette paired with black stilettos accentuating her toned, feminine legs, this ensemble is less than proper etiquette for any royal in the public eye. One can only begin to question Princess Diana's nerve and audacity through her clothing choices. The revenge dress is combining the manipulative aspects of the classic film noir femme fatale with the evolved undertones of mocking and self awareness. She further pays homage to Chanel's use of the colour black; specifically her design choices against the typical flamboyant and textured flapper dresses of the 20s. What is commonly a colour worn surrounding death and mourning turns to an eye catching and bordering sexual motif. Similarly, what is commonly a situation met with dispair and dread turns to one of self dignity and unwavering pride. Even from just glancing at a single photograph from this event, Diana is saying with her dress that she is not upset over her supposed loss, but she knows she is better than that. Further, she wore this dress knowing she would get photographed and perceived in such a controversial and misunderstood manner. It was a calculated choice as a celebrity to make such a bold statement to the mainstream media.

The LBD’s Evolution

Then, how exactly has the little black dress changed from Audrey Hepburn's time to Princess Diana's? Featured in the 2017-2018 Moma exhibition titled *Items: Is Fashion Modern*, this display shows a variety of little black dresses which range in time periods, fits, designated spaces to be worn, designers, and cultural backgrounds. The first piece starting on the left is the recognizable and versatile original Chanel design (1925–27), while the dresses get progressively newer as we move to the right, ultimately reaching the late 60s. Many questions can arise from the critique of the dress's evolution. How might different designers of different time periods and places interpret the dress differently? How are the forms of the various dresses indicative of what kind of woman would wear them— and for what? For instance, the second dress on the left was designed by Paris based British designer Charles Creed in 1942. The wearer may be a woman attending her job, perhaps as a secretary or telephone operator, as evidenced by the collard neckline and longer sleeves. In contrast, the fourth piece is one designed by Givenchy circa 1950, and I assume to be more appropriate for a going out occasion. With a tighter bodice, unique textures, and a flared skirt, the wearer desires the attention of passing eyes and twist the flared fabric for an audience.

Figure 5. A History of the LBD's Evolution. (2017-2018). From https://www.moma.org/audio/playlist/43/686

Valerie Steele, Director and chief curator of the Museum at the FIT, explains the bare essence of the little black dress through its manifestation in the "bad girl in the black dress and the good girl and the nun's habit," "dangerous and sexy," and Versace's "old punk classic" face (Steele,). She encourages us to think of this dress as less material and ultimately conceptual, for these great European fashion houses merely "[provide] a frame for the individual woman" (Steele), and reveal nothing paradoxical. After all, Chanel's revolutionary intent was to cater to the widest possible market at the time (Eschner, 2017). This idea is another instance where the little black dress mirrors the notion of 'metaness'. From what was forged on the basis of female wit, beauty, and innocent eroticism, our beloved little black dress will always circle back to this concept. Ergo, both the dress's varients of material creations and traits of the wearer are equal in respects to having been representative for its own broader audience of women. At this point, one may even claim for the intention of the little black dress to be a capitalist and consumerist scheme, like the larger part of fashion following the industrial revolution.

The LBD Through a Modern Framework

As we progress through the 21st century, it gets increasingly more challenging identifying what exactly constitutes a little black dress. With consumerism so rampant in modern society, the market continues to actively churn out new niche and short lasting subcultures. We might ask what a little black dress looks like today. Or has all the significance behind this design already been killed by its ubiquity?

Figure 6. Aritzia's Best Selling Shimmer Dress. From https://www.aritzia.com/en/product/shimmer-satin-dress/99544.html?dwvar_99544_color=1274

To closely study this issue, we can consider *Aritzia'*s 'Shimmer Dress' as a modern interpretation of the dress. With a fit intended to display the curves of the female body and significantly more skin than its predecessors, it can be assumed that the wearer would have a widely different intention and worldview. The wearer is also likely a party goer and socialite, yet this design varies so vastly from the 1950 Givenchy piece. Another trend observed in moving from left to right in the Met exhibition is the progression of tighter fitting and more revealing dresses.

The evolutional direction of the little black dress may be attributed to the progressively 'sluttier' clothes observed in the western fashion industry as a whole—an outlier of the ambiguous constituents of the little black dress. A radical critique laid upon the genre of 'sluttier' clothing for the female market as a whole is the disingenuous feeling of empowerment women feel when wearing suggestive clothes. Gail Dines, a professor specializing in radical feminism and pornography at Wheelock College in Boston, argues for the link of this trend to the growth of the sex work industry "The look is in part inspired by the sex industry … we are now expected to wear this attire everywhere— in school, on the street and at work" (Gibson, 2010, p. 103). For shouldn't a woman be able to feel just as empowering without having to show off her body— and make suggestive remarks to the public? Because of this newly formed social context, can we call the little black dress's almost entirely new personality the same as the old, classic femme fatale?

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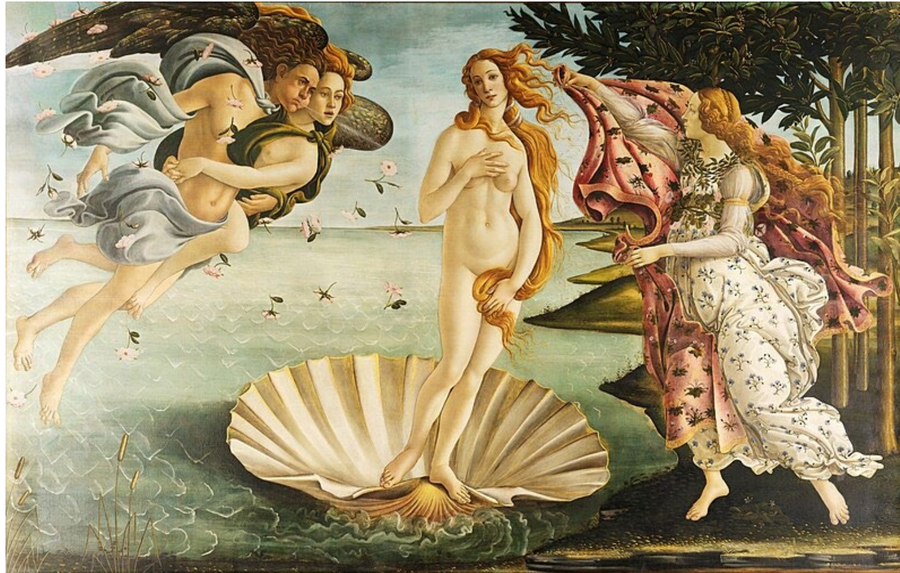

Figure 7. Birth of Venus by Sandro Boticelli. (1485–1486). From https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Birth_of_Venus#/media/File:Sandro_Botticelli_-_La_nascita_di_Venere_-_Google_Art_Project_-_edited.jpg

Yet, such an idea of the female body being perceived as something sacred and viscerally desired by men can date back centuries. Even exemplified in Boticelli's depiction of *Birth of Venus*, the goddess of love barely covers her breasts and genitalia with her gentle fingers and flowing hair. This aspect unveils a dichotomy within the ethicality behind the way fashion frames the female body. The traditional woman is the frail home-maker and gentle caregiver, yet her body operates as a weapon at the same time. She is a spiritual entity drawing the man in, taking advantage of his lust, then ultimately stabbing him in the back with the knowledge he will never attain her. Men feel unsettled around her, as she "[pushes] for greater economic, political and educational rights, challenging the established patriarchal order" (Pound, 2023).

It could even be argued that the little black dress overtime has always been inching toward these bor-dering 'pornostyle' remarks. The center dress designed by Dior exposes the females shoulders, and the Tulle dress on the far right provides a translucent veil. Both of these elements may even lure in the male gaze, and encourage his greedy eyes to imagine what exactly this veil is covering or what the body carries beyond the exposed shoulders. Interestingly, the modern Aritzia interpretation, made for mass purchases and comparatively easier accessibility, is the most blunt with this message. Perhaps this could elude to the straightforwardness of today's younger generation of females and feminists.

It may also be appropriate to introduce some classic Greek philosophies to this identity and ethics dilemma. In Plato's *The Republic*, he explores the nature of art and its abilities. He asserts the mimetic nature of art, stating that: "all the desires, pains, and pleasures in the soul that we say follow our action, poetic imitation produces similar results in us, for it fosters and waters them when they ought to be dried up, and sets them up as rulers in us" (Plato, 606d). Fashion, a concept bridging the artist and pragmatist, cannot initiate any new social movements on its own— and therefore cannot be blamed for any social decline. For instance, Lee Wright made the argument that the stiletto heel's attempt at objectifying the staple female characteristics within the era of the 50s demonstrated the segregation of the sexes only because of how divisive gender traits were in the first place (Wright, 2007, 198-199).

Conclusion

At its core, the Little Black Dress can only be indicative of the societal conditions in which each designer has experienced throughout their life and career. All and any variations of this prominent dress can coexist as mere products of their ever changing environment. We can now question the future connotations the Little Black Dress will carry with it. Considering the phenomena of intersectional feminism on the rise and the increase of political polarization in the west, we can do nothing but observe how these traditional feminine symbols are adapting. Can our classic Little Black Dress keep up with the times? Or will its popularity and symbolism falter alongside the femme fatale archetype?

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