**Application of feminist criticism on “Clothes”**

The previous course ends with the following question: which feminist critical method can one apply on Kafka’s “clothes”, “the images of women school” method or that of “Gynocriticism”?

Obviously, it is impossible to read “Clothes” from the perspective of **Gynocriticism**, for the latter refers to analysing the works written by female authors. Therefore, we shall apply “**the Images of Women School**”. The pertinent question is the following: **how does Kafka depict women in his short fiction “Clothes”**? Before giving any answer, we shall discuss the form and content of the story.

**“Clothes”** is a short-short story written by Franz Kafka, a Czech modernist writer, and translated into English by Willa and Edwin Muir. It is is composed of three paragraphs:

**Paragraph1:**

The first paragraph is both descriptive and impressionistic. The narrator starts the story with describing female luxurious traditional clothes—“clothes with manifold pleats, frills, and appendages”. This style of clothes indicates both time (around 19th century) and mood, for such dresses are worn mostly at parties where people are happily enjoying themselves. These dresses designate, as well, the women’s social class. Such “valuable gown” is mainly worn by wealthy women. The impression the narrator has about these clothes is that, despite their value and beauty –“smoothness…the embroidery”-- these clothes are apt to be damaged by time and thus turned to be old-fashioned : “they will get creases…dust…that it can’t be brushed away, and that no one would…wear the same valuable gown.” The flow of time is emphasized symbolically by the word “dust”. Moreover, dust , when spread thickly over an object, suggests that the object is neglected and no longer useful or used.

**Paragraph2**

Parallel to the above description of clothes, the narrator in this section is describing lovely and attractive young ladies who “display attractive muscles and small bones and smooth skin and masses of delicate hair.” Their physical beauty is projected on the looking glass. The use of the mirror is a technique to put emphasis on appearance and external beauty. The question that is raised here is **why does the narrator provide the reader with both a description of beautiful clothes and then a description of lovely young ladies**?

The answer can be deduced from his saying that women appear in “**the same natural fancy dress**” Dress in this phrase does not refer to their clothes but their bodies. Why? Because a body is a “ **natural** … dress”. While using “dress” as a synonym to a female body, the narrator is directing the reader to compare female bodies to clothes. Therefore, both clothes and bodies reflect female beauty and both of them are liable to be damaged through time. Both of them, get “creases” (wrinkles). This comparison is more obvious in the third paragraph.

**Paragraph3**

In this section, the narrative reaches its climatic point; it is the moment when the narrator makes it clear that women’s physical beauty, like clothes, is likely to be worn out: “**it** seems in the looking glass to be worn out, puffy, dusty….and hardly wearable any longer.” “**it**” in this sentence refers to the phrase: “**natural fancy dress**”, that is a female body. To put it in other words, sometimes, a woman, in front of a mirror will realise that her body (her **natural dress**) has changed through aging and so her physical appearance is no longer attracting others. **Notice** that the words the narrator uses to describe the female body in the last paragraph such as “**worn out,” “dusty**” and “**hardly wearable**”; they are the same expressions used while describing clothes in the first paragraph. Now we go back to the question: **How does Kafka represent women in his short story, “Clothes”?** I suggest two possible answers :

**First answer**. If I evaluate the story from “the Images of Women School” perspective, I would say that the writer presents a negative image of women for he focuses only on their physical beauty, neglecting the internal factors that constitute a human being such as intelligence emotions…etc. Moreover, being compared to clothes, a woman is treated as an object liable to be old-fashioned and thus thrown away. Compared to dresses, women are presented as commodities whose value is quantitative and not qualitative. Worse than that, clothes can be changed whereas women’s bodies could not be renewed: “they appear day in, day out, in this same natural fancy dress…only sometimes….it seems….hardly unwearable.”

**Second answer**. On the other hand, if I evaluate the text from an objective perspective, I would focus on the notion of **time** as the main theme in the story. Therefore, the author’s use or reference to the fragility and decadence of women’s clothes and bodies could be taken as examples to illustrate how human beings in general are vulnerable to destruction, in that, Time affects negatively both objects and human bodies. The difference is that objects can be replaceable, yet human bodies deteriorate once and for all.

*(Read the story in the light of these guiding interpretations. You can add your own suggestion; however, if ever you propose a view you should provide justification from the text. Any suggestion which is irrelevant to the framework of the story will not be accepted*)

**Good Luck**