

Though frowning on vanity in men, society punishes women who are not vain, even refusing them livelihoods, says Miss Hayes. She laments that "ordeals by heat and ammonia and anxious self-analyses" absorb time that should go to joyous hobbies, to thought, to far-reaching interests

By
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Hayes**



Do Clothes Make

Travelers returning to this country from abroad agree that the United States has the best dressed women in the world. In 1929 American producers alone sold over 180 million dollars' worth of perfumes, cosmetics, and other toilet preparations—more than seven times as much as were produced in the whole country in 1914. In 1930 nearly 375 thousand people told the census taker that their occupations were those of barber, hairdresser, or manicurist—nearly twice as many as in 1910. There is plenty of evidence that, as a nation, we spend a considerable and increasing proportion of our economic resources in maintaining the reputation of having the best dressed women in the world.

But is that a matter for pride? I am a woman, young, with a normal capacity for getting satisfaction from the consciousness, when I can achieve it, of being well turned out. But I find myself increasingly dissatisfied with the proportion of time and thought that American women of my day are expected to give to appearance.

I say "of my day," for my grandmother, when my age, had adopted the comfortable black silk dress that was the uniform of the matron in those days. Her only cosmetic was talcum powder. She was typical of women of

Saturday afternoons that winter or summer, used to be spent in the country—

her day who considered it unbecoming to give such attention to appearance as was characteristic of young girls "out to catch a husband," or women of light morals.

They would be amazed if, awaking from a Rip Van Winkle sleep, they observed us at the systematic business of being beautiful. We are constantly reminded that every moment is a beauty contest; that dull, lifeless hair may lose for us romance or a job; that age is no excuse for not having that schoolgirl complexion. Most women would be hardly more willing to appear in public without the bi-weekly, or even weekly, torture of hours beneath a drier, "setting" a wave, than a few years ago they would have appeared with petticoats dragging. Business women accept as inevitable the custom of spending most of their time outside of working hours preparing their clothes and persons for the office.

This absorption in appearance is reflected in our conversation. H. T. Moore reported twelve years ago in *The Journal of Abnormal Psychology* what may have been a discovery to scientists but would hardly startle the man on the street: that whereas after the day's work is done men are primarily interested in money, business, and amusement, the subject in which women are most interested—next to the ever-engrossing subject of men themselves—is clothes. M. H. Landis and H. E. Burrtt verified this conclusion two years later with a similar tabulation of conversations. The study is reported in *The Journal of Comparative Psychology*.

Recently I had occasion to arrange an educational program for employed women. There was, due partly to business conditions, little demand for courses dealing with their work. Plans for talks on current events, on problems of buying, and interior decoration aroused only mild interest. Then a lecture was given on dress. The women listened with the rapt attention of religious devotees, took notes as carefully as a college class preparing for examination, and invited the lecturer to return for a series.

At first glance feminine vanity might seem to account for the phenomena. But when I recall my grandmother, younger when she put aside

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INDEPENDENT WOMAN

Do Clothes Make the Woman? -- Hayes

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curls and gay dresses than were most of the women at the lecture. I recall the comfortably dowdy women of similar age and occupation whom I met in England and on the continent. I recall, too, the evidences I have observed in working with men and women that vanity is a human, not merely a feminine trait. Indeed, not many generations have passed since men were as gorgeous as bright brocades, powdered wigs, and silk hose could make them.

But society today discourages vanity in men. There is no feminine equivalent for the opprobrious words: fop, dandy, and dude. Society not only does not discourage vanity in women; it punishes us if we are not vain, even to the extent of making it hard for us to earn a living. In several years of contact with the employment of women, I found few cases where women of fine appearance could not find work, regardless of experience or training. I have known (as who has not?) many women of good qualifications, who, even in prosperous times, could not find work commensurate with their abilities because, although neat and clean, their appearance was not sufficiently alluring.

There is the case of a stenographer employed by a large concern—not the one I know best. She was assigned to take the dictation of several executives. Her small earnings constituted the resources of a family of five. One day her supervisor told her that she must get more variety in her wardrobe, as the men she served did not like to see the same dress every day. The family skimped their diet in order that something might be saved out of her pay check each week to buy a new frock. She got it, but at a cost

of such hardship to a self-respecting family as seems hardly warranted by the hardship of her employers in looking at her neat but monotonous garb.

Such instances are fortunately rare. But one has only to read the service columns of the daily papers to realize how often "a young woman, size thirty-six, could obtain a position if some kind person would give her suitable clothes." Most women know, moreover, that employers expect more than mere suitability and variety. The experience of another woman of my acquaintance seems worth quoting, as it illustrates the pressure that is brought upon American women to be not merely suitably dressed, but dressed with elaborate attention to effect.

This young woman has always been meticulous about starting the day with fresh linen, smooth hair, and shined shoes. But when she first entered the business world she resorted to few tricks of make-up, selected her office clothes with consideration to conservative good taste, wore her long hair straight, and forgot her appearance while working.

A few years ago she was nominated for office in an organization to which she belonged. This organization named two candidates for each office and conducted a mock political campaign with considerable fervor. She entered into it in the spirit of a good game, but was told by several of her masculine well-wishers that she would probably be defeated because of her opponent's better looks. She learned that it was taken for granted that a woman's vote-getting ability depended less upon her reputation for friendliness than on the way she met the eye, and that appearance depended on clothes rather than features.

Then she found that even personal relationships could be affected by the demand that women conform to a standard pattern in appearance. She was talking with a man on the need for reciprocal adjustments between friends. He blurted out that the adjustment he wished she would make for him was to be a pretty girl more often.

About that time her supervisor informed her that he wished she would take more interest in her looks. Her position did not require her to meet the public, and there was no imputation that her appearance decreased her effectiveness in her work. But he liked the women in his office to look smart and fashionable, and immaculately groomed every minute of the day.

I heard of it all when she came to a number of her friends for advice. Did her practical dark clothes seem too somber? Was her simple hairdress too strange among a lot of ringleted heads? We assured her that her questions could be answered in the negative, and that her appearance was as pleasing to our taste as that of her critics.

But she capitulated. Her salary is no longer spent as generously as before in helping needy philanthropies; in buying books; in providing seats for the plays and concerts that used to lift her heart. Saturdays that used to be spent on country roads are now devoted to shopping. She is one more recruit to the ranks of well-dressed American women; one more personality turned from objective interest in the world about, to an inverted contemplation of its own aspect.

Some women are born beautiful. Some achieve beauty. The friend whose story I have told is one of many who have had it thrust upon them. When I consider the costs to habits of detached thought and outgoing interest, I wonder whether the results are worth the price. How can whole-souled creative effort be expected from individuals a portion of whose attention must constantly be on the thought: "How do I look?"

This diversion of interest to self seems incompatible with the unselfconscious concentration essential to scientific or artistic accomplishment or significant community service. Imagine Mme. Curie interrupting an experiment to repair her complexion. Picture Mary Austin spending hours shopping for a modish hat during those years when her mind dwelt among the Indians, bringing to life stories such as *The Arrow-maker*. Consider where in her busy days of service Jane Addams could have found time for appointments with a hairdresser. To be sure, genius has always been excused from adherence to conventional standards; but genius flowers more abundantly in societies whose conventional standards are favorable.

After all, however, my chief quarrel with this beauty business is that it makes life dull. The joy of the spontaneous hobby is not for us who must spend our spare time conscientiously pursuing our trade journals, the fashion magazines. For us instead the foot-weary rounds of shopping; the ordeal by heat and ammonia vapor that tortures our hair into curls; and the sometimes smug but often anxious self-analyses and self-comparisons that give those favored by nature more complacency, and those not favored more despair.

A well known woman author is reported to have looked over an audience assembled to hear her speak, in a city not her own. "My goodness!" she exclaimed. "I never saw so many well-dressed women in one room in my life. Think of the hundreds of hours of lovely time that must have been sacrificed to get all these women here in such a state of grooming. Isn't it appalling?"

When I think of all the hours of lovely time that are sacrificed daily to send hundreds of thousands of office workers to their desks resembling as nearly as nature permits the visions of screen and dentifrice advertisement, I echo: isn't it appalling?

INDEPENDENT WOMAN

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