

CLOTHING AND FASHION IN CONTEMPORARY CRIME FICTION BY ROBERT GALBRAITH

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Summary

The plots of Robert Galbraith's *Strike* novels are built around the problem of crime; at the same time, the author covers a wide range of social topics that reflect today's urban culture. The descriptions of fashion tendencies, high-style apparel and clothes worn on the street, personalized styles and mundane clothing communicate the idea of social, ethnic, cultural, subcultural diversity of contemporary London.

Three general constituents of fashion phenomenon are spotlighted in Galbraith's novels: design and advertising/promotion, trade, clothes and their wearers. Their presentations are studied through Text World Theory analysis: world-builders (characters/enactors and objects), relational processes, and function-advancing propositions; linguistic cues that guide the interpretation of particular text-worlds are indicated too. At the opposite points of the spectrum of fashion phenomenon – text-worlds of designing and text-worlds of wearing clothes – the role of characters/enactors is more pronounced than that of objects: clothes are means of self-expression and self-presentation. Alternatively, clothing sometimes is a telltale sign; also, on the reception side, the effect may be opposite to the one intended. In text-worlds of advertising/promotion, the role of objects is more important than the role of enactors. In text-worlds of fashion trade, objects are often presented from the enactors' perspectives, which suggests equal importance of both world-builders. In the context of Galbraith's novels, clothes "interact" with people who create and wear them, highlighting their identities, social status, views, tastes or revealing their true nature.

Key words: Robert Galbraith, novels of the *Strike* series, fashion industry and consumption, attire, contemporary London, text-worlds.

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1. Introduction

The *Strike* series is classic contemporary crime fiction by Robert Galbraith (J. K. Rowling), which gives its readers a broad and realistic picture of today's London. Clothing and fashion are one of the aspects of a multifaceted image of the city. The relevance of this research is determined by the popularity of the author as well as general interest in the subject of fashion. London fashion gets specific attention due to the city's dynamic design and marketing, a

marked tendency to overstep the boundaries of convention, exceptionally rich cultural fabric of the British capital, and the flourishing network of alternative-cultural street markets, such as Camden (Breward, 2004: 19).

Clothes reflect sociality; they are, in a way, a depository of cultural values and one of the factors in the construction of identity (Felshin, 1995: 20). While following current trends, a person still strives for self-expression and authenticity (Michael, 2015). However, it is not always easy to understand a relationship between clothing and identity because attire cues may have different meanings to observers and individuals wearing particular clothes (Feinberg et al., 1992: 18). Ever new versions of urban fashionability are triggered by the conflict between individualism and commodification (Breward, 2004: 19). Like in other creative industries, commercial and artistic/decorative functions of fashion are not fully separated (Demydenko, 2023: 206).

Peter McNeil et al. (2009: 5–6) discuss the function of fashion within the structures of fictional discourses, “From Jay Gatsby’s gold and white aura in F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* to the street garb of Anthony Burgess’s *A Clockwork Orange*, or modern Japanese fiction, clothes define, sustain, and give voice to social momentum and the stages of life”. According to Cristina Giorcelli (2017), descriptions of clothing bring fiction closer to reality; they are indirect indications of class/gender and particular social contexts, reveal individuality (anti-fashion), generate intersubjectivity, and even express a desire for a new cultural identity. One of the functions of clothing/fashion descriptions in literary works is metonymic presentation of characters’ identities and intentions. Yet this obvious role has a more sophisticated meaning than may be assumed at first glance: writers seek forming strong contractual expectations between themselves and their readers; fashion, which has its inherent meaning, helps a reader get not only a character’s but also the writer’s intention (McNeil et al., 2009: 6). Moreover, depictions of clothes enable authors raise the topics of predestinarianism and freedom, social convention and human’s ability to fulfill one’s potential, adjustability and autonomy of imagination; they also show the creative potential of language that turns the commonplace into originality (Cook, 2013: 2).

This study is based on the series of *Strike* novels by Robert Galbraith. The objective of the article is to examine the author’s perspective on the phenomenon of fashion and clothing in the social context of contemporary London. Galbraith’s descriptions of the world of fashion and Londoners’ attire preferences are specific representations of the urban culture and “exemplify the real-world nature of fictional information, mak[ing] a ‘bridge’ between reality and literary discourse” (Kulchytska, Erlikhman, 2024: 92). The tasks of the research are to discuss the following aspects of Galbraith’s novels:

- constituents of fashion phenomenon – design and advertising/promotion, trade, and consumption;
- factors in creating fashion text-worlds;
- linguistic cues for interpretation of particular text-worlds;
- character-clothing relationship.

The analysis is conducted along the lines of the Text World Theory by Paul Werth (1999) and Joanna Gavins (2007, 2020). Text-worlds are regarded as mental constructs, representations of (literary) discourse (Werth, 1999: 7; Gavins, 2007: 2, 10; 2020: 4–5). They are pictures in the author’s and a reader’s minds built with the help of and interpreted according to linguistic cues in a particular text, and with reliance on one’s background knowledge. The basic factors in creation and interpretation of text-worlds are (i) world-building elements (world-builders): spatiotemporal parameters, characters (enactors), objects; (ii) relational processes: identifying

or attributive characteristics; (iii) function-advancing propositions: presenting events, actions, states. Examination of the role of fashion and clothes in creating pictures of contemporary London in Robert Galbraith's novels involves considering (a) correlation between descriptions of designing/advertising/trade/consuming on the one hand and the above text-world factors on the other; (b) linguistic units that pertain to the subject of this research and are cues for interpretation of particular text-worlds.

2. Fashion image of contemporary London

The temporal parameters of the action in the seven already published novels of the *Strike* series (*Robert Galbraith, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2018, 2020, 2022, 2023*) are 2010–2016. The protagonists are London-based private detective Cormoran Strike and his female partner Robin Ellacott. London and Londoners are presented from the perspective of both the omniscient narrator and the two main characters.

The novels adequately reflect diversity of London's fashion image. Here are a few of the many examples: an assistant in the Vashti boutique "was wearing a tutu and fishnets"; "The area [in Shoreditch] had a large proportion of Muslim residents. Strike passed them in their hijabs and taqiyahs"; "The shoppers on Catford Broadway were wearing T-shirts and sandals; black women passed in brightly coloured head wraps"; at the entrance to the Stafford, Robin saw "a suited man hand in hand with a beautiful Asian woman in a cheongsam"; Strike's rich half-sister Prudence has clothes with labels Robin "could never have afforded: Valentino, Chanel, Yves Saint Laurent" (*Robert Galbraith, 2013: 236; 2015: 404, 442; 2020: 814; 2023: 77* respectively).

Descriptions of fashion and clothing in Galbraith's novels can be divided into three classes: design and advertising/promotion, fashion trade, clothes and their wearers.

3. Design and advertising/promotion

The Cuckoo's Calling contains several vivid depictions of Guy Somé's fashion business (*Robert Galbraith, 2013: 305, 315*): his studio, business policy, such as getting endorsements by sending customised freebies to celebrities, some products, and a fashion shoot. For instance (emphasis added):

"[...] There was a T-shirt lying on the desk, which carried a picture of Princess Diana as a garish Mexican Madonna, glittering with bits of glass and beads, and complete with a flaming scarlet heart of shining satin, on which an embroidered crown was perched lopsided.

'You like it?' said Somé, noticing the direction of Strike's gaze.

'Oh yeah,' lied Strike."

(*Robert Galbraith, 2013: 306*)

At first glance, this text-world spotlights an object, a T-shirt. The relational processes (underlined in the extract above) are expressed by a complex non-defining relative clause with a participle construction, an adverbial clause, noun/adjective phrases. The metaphors PRINCESS DIANA IS MADONNA and PRINCESS DIANA IS THE QUEEN OF HEARTS are quite transparent. According to the Text World Theory (*Gavins, 2007: 152–156*) metaphor is double vision, simultaneous coexistence of the initial text-world and the metaphorical blended world; in this case, they are the designer's studio, his product, and the image he creates. A creative person's individual conceptualization of reality is determined by the system of his/her personal

values and can focus on existential manifestations of human life (Doichyk, 2013: 32, 34). Therefore, these metaphors bring to the fore the personality of the designer himself: his eclectic style is boundary-breaking; at the same time, it is obvious that he capitalizes on public sympathies for the late Princess Diana.

The next text-world is a description of a fashion shoot (emphasis added):

“[...] Here was an artful arrangement of tattered old chairs, one on its side, and three models. They were a breed apart, with faces and bodies in rare proportions that fell precisely between the categories of strange and impressive. Fine-bones and recklessly slim, they had been chosen, Strike assumed, for the dramatic contrast in their colouring and features. Sitting like Christine Keeler on a back-to-front chair, long legs splayed in spray-on white leggings, but apparently naked from the waist up, was a black girl as dark-skinned as Somé himself, with an Afro and slanting, seductive eyes. Standing over her in a **white vest decorated in chains, which just covered her pubis**, was a Eurasian beauty with flat black hair cut into an asymmetric fringe. To one side, leaning alone and sideways on the back of another chair, was Ciara Porter; alabaster fair, with long baby-blond hair, wearing a **white semi-transparent jumpsuit** [...]”

(Robert Galbraith, 2013: 378–379)

At first, attention is caught by the description of the three models, enactors, whose relational processes (underlined in the example above) exceed in both number and expressiveness the relational processes of objects, clothes (typed in bold style). The relational processes are expressed by adjectives, a participle construction, and an attributive clause. The characteristics of the clothing are somewhat dulled by the repetition of the same property, namely the common colour. On the other hand, the design and the material of the garments indicate a tendency to provocativeness, while the motionlessness of the scene emphasized by the verbs of stillness (the function-advancing propositions “Sitting”, “Standing”, “leaning”) suggests that the function of the enactors is to present important objects – items of clothing.

4. Fashion trade

The author presents fashion trade through the triple opposition between what designer Guy Somé calls “proper stuff that goes for upwards of three grand a coat”, off the rack stuff with his logo slapped on, which makes it “sell like crazy” (Robert Galbraith, 2013: 321), and cheap clothes stores in less respectable parts of London.

The description of Vashti, a fictitious boutique placed by the author in Mayfair (one of the most expensive areas of the real-world London), is several pages long and contains a number of world-switches that feed into the matrix Vashti text-world. Only some aspects of this extensive description are discussed below.

Strike and Robin fake interest in clothing just to talk to the the staff about one of Vashti’s customers, a supermodel, whose unnatural death they investigate (Robert Galbraith, 2013: 224–230). From Strike’s perspective, the boutique sells “a multitudinous mess of life unnecessities”; he can “imagine Tansy Bestigui and Ursula May in here, examining price tags with expert eyes, selecting four-figure bags of alligator skin [...]”. Strike’s derogatory opinion is expressed by the initial world-builder “a mess of life unnecessities”, which imparts a negative colouring to the two semantically almost neutral function-advancing propositions “examining price tags with expert eyes, selecting four-figure bags of alligator skin”. Pretending to be a prospective customer, Robin takes “ten thousand pounds’ worth of goods into the

changing room with her, of which the sequined coat cost[s] half. [...] the thing [is] glittering like a lizard's skin". She calls the coat "fabulous" to humour the assistants; Strike privately thinks that it is "vile". Robin tries on another piece of clothing, a black dress, and feels "acutely uncomfortable in a lace and leather straightjacket". Finally, she chooses a really beautiful green Cavalli dress (described further in the text of this article).

Another, a much shorter, example of fashion trade text-world is a description of an area in Shoreditch, a part of London's East-End, where Strike browses "the many cheap clothes shops, all bearing names like International Fashion and Made in Milan and displaying sad mannequins in synthetic wigs wearing nylon and polyester" (*Robert Galbraith, 2015: 404*).

In both examples, objects (items of clothing) are put in the focus of attention thanks to their relational processes, expressed by pre-/post-modified noun phrases (e.g. "sad mannequins in synthetic wigs"), and function-advancing propositions (e.g. "the thing [is] glittering like a lizard's skin"). The role of enactors is rather important because clothes are presented through their perceptions. Spatial parameters, descriptions of markedly different neighbourhoods, are relevant cues to interpreting each text-world. It is also notable that Vashti is mostly an epistemic modal focalization-world, while the picture of Shoreditch clothes shops is a deictic text-world.

5. Clothes and their wearers

In each particular case, clothing allows a reader to get an idea of different aspects of characters' personalities; for instance, Leonora Quine's indifference to anything beyond her family's immediate needs; vanity of Owen Quine, a mediocre writer; sexuality of Ciara Porter, a model; poor psychological and physical state of Billy Knight, a mentally ill young man from a working-class background; self-absorption of elegant Raphael Chiswell, a cynical murderer; sophisticated taste of Charlotte Campbell, a rich socialite; anxiety of Edie Ledwell and her awkward attempts to adjust to her new, greatly improved financial status, which has brought her no happiness; materialism and duplicity of Jonathan Wace, the leader of the Universal Humanitarian Church (*Robert Galbraith, 2014: 17, 48, 387 and 398; 2018: 46, 201, 512; 2022: 57–58; 2023: 550* respectively). In what follows, we will discuss three examples of how attire highlights characters' personal and social identities.

The first extract is the descriptions of a Cavalli dress. Robin tries it on with the only purpose to start a friendly conversation with assistants in the Vashti boutique about one of their rich customers (emphasis added):

"The green dress was magically constructed to shrink her waist to nothingness, to carve her figure into flowing curves, to elongate her pale neck. She was a serpentine goddess in glittering viridian [...]."

(*Robert Galbraith, 2013: 229*)

The text-world focuses prime attention on the enactor. The dress bringing Robin's prettiness into sharp relief; the effect is achieved through relational processes and function-advancing propositions underlined in the extract above.

Yet Robin is much more than just a pretty girl. She is a kind of an "intellectual who is ready to work hard [...], often sacrificing personal happiness and facing rejection in society" (*Devdiuk, Huliak, 2022: 33*). At work, she does not want to emphasize her natural attractiveness and finds it easier to wear not dresses but jeans (*Robert Galbraith, 2020: 662*). While in Victorian fiction female detectives wear clothing that reflects the views of the then society on

what “befits” their gender (*Hunt, 2019: 129*), in the 21st century, Robin is not restricted by social prescriptions. She chooses clothing that best suits her purpose in this or that situation – jeans, suits, casual or smart dresses, trainers or high heeled shoes, etc.

Another text-world exemplifies a false identity of a goth (or an emo) girl, which Robin assumes while investigating a case in Camden (emphasis added):

“The short black second-hand dress she had bought at the local Oxfam shop in Deptford still smelled slightly fusty [...], and she wore it with thick black tights and a pair of black lace-up boots in spite of the warmth of the morning.”

(*Robert Galbraith, 2018: 470–471*)

The portrait is completed with much make-up and cheap ear cuffs. The depiction of the assumed image relies on the objects and relational processes expressed by the pre-modified noun phrases, as well as on the function-advancing proposition (underlined in the example above).

The next excerpt is a picture of Rochelle Onifade, a down-and-out young woman, who – quite surprisingly – wears an expensive jacket (emphasis added):

“Her tight, too-short jeans, her shiny grey handbag and her bright white trainers looked cheap. However, the squashy fake-fur jacket, garish and unflattering though Strike found it, was of a different quality altogether: fully lined, as he saw when she took it off, with a patterned silk, and bearing the label not [...] of Guy Somé, but of an Italian of whom even Strike had heard.”

(*Robert Galbraith, 2013: 274–275*)

The juxtaposition of the cheap clothes and handbag, and the expensive jacket (the underlined pre/post-modified noun phrases and function-advancing propositions) indicate obvious personality traits and reveal some concealed ones: lack of taste, greediness, and shortsightedness. Strike, who investigates a murder, deduces that Rochelle Onifade is stupid enough to blackmail the murderer thus making herself his next target.

The three extracts above are examples of relations between clothes and their wearers: clothing can emphasize certain qualities of a character, help a character to achieve his/her aim; on the other hand, it can expose his/her true nature.

6. Conclusions

Descriptions of clothing and fashion trends in Robert Galbraith’s novels is a factor in creating a realistic image of contemporary London. The author describes or makes references to major constituents in the spectrum of fashion phenomenon: design/advertising/promotion, fashion trade, and fashion consumers. In terms of Text World Theory, world-builders such as enactors (characters) and objects (attire) are foregrounded, though not necessarily in this order. In the text-worlds of fashion design and wearing particular clothes, the enactors’ role is primary; while in fashion advertising, the characters are used to direct readers’ attention to the objects they demonstrate. As to the fashion trade text-words, objects are presented through either the omniscient narrator’s or characters’ perceptions; the latter case can give additional contextual cues for interpretation.

For the purpose of this study, we can paraphrase Gottfried Keller’s (1913:11) famous words “Kleider machen Leute” (clothes make people): Robert Galbraith shows how clothes

interact with people. Fashion style and clothing can emphasize or hide characters' social and personal identities, views, attitudes, intentions, help characters attain their goals. Clothes may also reveal more about a character than he/she would like others to know. When chosen by a character (or by the author for a particular character), clothes still maintain a certain degree of "autonomy".

The genre of detective fiction allows Robert Galbraith to describe various aspects of culture and style of life in contemporary Britain. Analysis of interior designs of public spaces and private homes as depicted by the author can be an interesting subject for further research.

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