

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE DINNER SUIT AND DEPICTIONS OF FORMALWEAR IN WILLIAM QUILLER ORCHARDSON'S *MARIAGE DE CONVENANCE*

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Abstract: Scottish Artist William Quiller Orchardson (1832-1910) depicted numerous high-society scenes, and clothing is a central feature of these works. The following essay will use his *Mariage de Convenance* painting as a foundation for a contextualization of the developments of male formalwear (with particular regard to the Dinner Suit) in the latter period of Orchardson's career, and will pass comment on the social ramifications of this, both for the characters of his work, and beyond.



Fig. 1: William Quiller Orchardson, *Mariage de Convenance*, 1883, oil on canvas, Glasgow Museums, Scotland <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/arts/yourpaintings/paintings/le-mariage-de-convenance-85546>> [accessed 27 January 2014]

This article's aim is to use William Quiller Orchardson's *Mariage de Convenance* (1883) [See Fig.1] as a way to begin a contextualisation and analysis of the developments in male formalwear in the late Victorian period. Orchardson had a long-established connection with male dress and its importance: he was 'the son of a Scottish father, Abram Orchardson, who was a tailor.'¹ This resonated from an early age, and by the end of his life 'period costumes for dressing models were a prominent part of the artist's House Sale in 1910: costumes alone accounted for 130 lots.'² He

¹ William R. Hardie, *A Scottish Arts Council Exhibition: Sir William Quiller Orchardson, R.A.* (Edinburgh: Scottish Arts Council, 1972), p.7

² Hardie, *A Scottish Arts Council Exhibition*, p.6

was meticulous about the clothing on display in his work, and would undertake ‘months of research, often in the Victoria and Albert (then the South Kensington) Museum.’³

‘After the fall of the Second Empire in 1870, France had permanently lost its sartorial pre-eminence, as English society in ever-greater numbers opted to patronize London’s tailors and dressmakers rather than make the once-customary annual trip to Paris.’⁴ As a London resident for most of his painting career, and with a tailor father, his use of clothing as an indicator of mood and personality for his subjects and the narratives they inhabit is noteworthy. Narrative quality is important and deliberate, chiming with concerns of the time, noted in this 1904 letter: “I wonder what it is that the writers of fiction pay so little attention to the costuming of their male characters,” the letter began; “of course, nobody expects a man’s clothes to be as interesting as a woman’s, but they certainly deserve more space than they get in novels, particularly the novels of women.”⁵ Orchardson’s painting is narrative: concerns here about the written word are addressed in his work with the brush, and depictions of clothing help facilitate that.

‘Two developments are conspicuous in Orchardson’s later subject-matter: the growing preoccupation with a late Victorian and Edwardian dream of material elegance, on the one hand; and on the other, an increased empathy with the inhabitants of the gilded cage.’⁶ *Mariage de Convenance* depicts a private supper between man and wife, presided over by a butler. The woman embodies the cause for empathy, and sartorial depictions help to convey this. ‘The charcoal study...which does not even include the figure of the wife which is so essential to the ‘story’, shows that Orchardson was primarily concerned in this painting to indicate a certain effect of light.’⁷ Hardie’s noting of ‘story’ confirms the worth of narrative here; clothes are a functioning piece of that narrative and contextual knowledge allows them to speak out to the viewer metaphorically. Whilst this analysis of *Mariage de Convenance* is concerned with male clothing, it is primarily a painting about a woman: she is the character best embodying the turmoil of the scene; the male is a focalization of her unhappiness, but she is the one displaying emotive responses. Additionally, she is absent in the painting’s sequel; she is visible in a portrait over the husband’s shoulder, but there is no actual female presence [See Fig.2].

Orchardson’s painting presents a divide between the two figures, most directly created by their sitting at the opposite ends of a long dining table, adorned with fine tableware, food, and decoration: ‘in an era of crowded compositions, his use of empty spaces is refreshing.’⁸ The setting is likely a grand townhouse, whilst the beige and brown palette of the décor further draws the eye to the focal point of the well-lit table. To the left, the young wife sits, uninterested, unhappy, and bored, her body language closed off to her husband, seated right. He looks defeated; attempts at conversation will likely fall flat. Their ages are of extremes: she is perhaps in her early twenties, whilst he is in his sixties. Interestingly, Orchardson’s own domestic existence was a happy one: ‘his family and his home were the real centre of his life: he was a devoted husband and father. His daughter regarded the pictures which show domestic strife – e.g. the three ‘*Mariage de Convenance*’ pictures – as attempts by Orchardson to imagine the converse of his own happily married life.’⁹ The dress of the painted couple and their unhappiness serve as a

³ Hardie, *A Scottish Arts Council Exhibition*, p.6

⁴ Brent Shannon, *The Cut of his Coat: Men, dress, and consumer culture in Britain, 1860 1914* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2006), p.2

⁵ Shannon, *The Cut of his Coat*, p.1

⁶ Hardie, *A Scottish Arts Council Exhibition*, p.12

⁷ Hardie, *A Scottish Arts Council Exhibition*, p.13

⁸ Hardie, *A Scottish Arts Council Exhibition*, p.13

⁹ Hardie, *A Scottish Arts Council Exhibition*, p.12

reason to engage with the wider sartorial undertakings of the high society of the time. She is depicted as embodying characteristics of young ladies of the period, with her dress and manner suggesting she would rather be socialising with men her age. Atypically however, circumstance has most led to her entering this titular marriage of convenience: the relationship has allowed for financial and societal comfort, but her actual desires are clear; they are not sat across from her.

The husband's clothing is traditional eveningwear for dinner at home: tailcoat and trousers, stiff bib fronted high collared shirt, white waistcoat, and white bowtie. As a nod to their stilted relationship his buttonhole, likely a carnation, appears to be wilting. Importantly, there is little distinction between the gentleman's and his butler's dress; it became a 'recurrent complaint by gentleman that conventional evening dress rendered them indistinguishable from servants.'¹⁰ Both in tailcoats and white bowties, there is little to distinguish. The shorter dinner jacket, developed in this period, would go on to offer a more apparent visual distinction between guests and the tailcoat-wearing staff, as would the manner of its easy fit and the relatively casual cut in shaping the behaviour of the gentlemen and the service.

By the 1880s, the *Gazette of Fashion and Cutting Room Companion* began to refer to the critique of conventional evening dress 'as the "waiter argument," [See Fig.3] and many called for a radical redesign of formal evening wear...yet several fashion authorities and journalists dismissed such objections. "It is not necessary to have a distinguishing dress for a waiter," *Clothes and the Man* concluded; "If a gentleman is a gentleman, what does it matter if the mistake is made?"¹¹ For Brent Shannon, 'clothing acts as a symbolic visual code by which individuals communicate to others their membership in a particular social group.'¹² However, James Laver is quoted as stating that 'clothes of the gentility do not say "I am a man – And how!" but "I am a gentleman, and I hope to attract women not by asserting my masculinity but by demonstrating my membership of a social class."¹³ The gentleman in the painting has attracted a woman with his social bearing, but he does not maintain the relationship, as it is built on nothing more than this premise. Regardless of these conflicting positions, a change in eveningwear was developing.

It is apparent from the demeanour of the couple in Orchardson's work that his membership of the upper class is the defining factor in their relationship. His age and deportment suggest a bearing not suited to her actual preferences, but nonetheless his status affords her a lifestyle more comfortable than that faced if not married; the work's title reflects this: 'she might not be physically attracted to her older husband; he might lack the physical and emotional energy of a younger man; she might have less in common with him than a younger man and thus find herself bereft of true companionship; he might be unwilling or unable to produce children.'¹⁴ At the time of the painting of this piece, developments in men's formalwear flourished among a small and sociable group, and for varying reasons. Notably, 'the upper-classes developed increasingly complex fashion rules and occasion-specific clothing to distinguish themselves from the rising bourgeoisie.'¹⁵ The dinner jacket, a more casual adoption of eveningwear, serves as an acknowledgement of this deliberate creation of class distinction, whilst also meeting requirements of relaxing tastes and priorities of comfort.

In 1888, *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle* noted that dinner jackets are 'worn with the low cut waistcoat and black trousers of the ordinary evening dress and though it is somewhat informal in

¹⁰ Shannon, *The Cut of his Coat*, p.149

¹¹ Shannon, *The Cut of his Coat*, p.152

¹² Shannon, *The Cut of his Coat*, p.14

¹³ Shannon, *The Cut of his Coat*, p.161

¹⁴ Harvey Rachlin, *Scandals, Vandals and da Vincis: A Gallery of Remarkable Art Tales* (London: Robson Books, 2007), pp. 210-11

¹⁵ Shannon, *The Cut of his Coat*, p.18

appearance it is far from being an infringement of the conveniences which require a fixed uniform for all men after dark;¹⁶ moreover, 'it was cool and comfortable, and saved wear and tear of the daily use upon the dress coat, with the consequences that it took at once. The following winter men wore it to bachelor dinners and to their own tables when guests were not present.'¹⁷ This new comfort and relaxation juxtaposes with the husband's rigidity in tradition and propriety: 'fashion was linked to sartorial propriety in many ways...it was subordinated to propriety: "manners" set limits on fashion's domain, limits that could be overstepped with impunity only when new "manners" were established.'¹⁸

'Propriety was the venerable, recognized science of appropriately handling possibilities in clothing according to place and circumstance, while fashion was the unstable, ever-changing science of optimum management of the possible within an interplay of innovation and obsolescence.'¹⁹ Orchardson's man values propriety above fashion; his wife likely values fashion above propriety: they are at an impasse. 'Menswear – epitomized by the development and the endurance of the men's three-piece business suit – has long been regarded by fashion historians as both uniform and *a* uniform, reflecting men's desire to adopt a standardized, fixed, and practical costume that affords little room for ornamental flair or personal expression.'²⁰ The man depicted is sombre and expressionless; formalwear's remit is to create a consistent appearance in male clothing so as to enable women to stand out; instead, in Orchardson's painting, it brings her down. 'By mid-century...colour, decoration, and fittedness remained only in military and evening wear...the straight lines, practical fabrics, dark tones, and loose fit of men's dress – juxtaposed against the flowing lines, rich materials, fine detail, and constricting forms of women's dress – has become a powerful sign system of gender segregation.'²¹ The dichotomy of male and female is seen in Orchardson's painting; the layers of fabric in her dress, and the slumped posture she holds contrast the staid pose of the man. In this instance she is likely judging his uniformity; his clothing allegorizes his lack of character, and his inability to excite her; he conforms to uniform rather than subverting it within the parameters possible, as was happening elsewhere at this time.

Dressing for dinner in the most formal way possible is a visual metaphor for the man's lack of creativity and malleability within his societal framework, and it is easy to then interpret an unadventurous personality based upon her reaction. Her body language, age, and decorum seem to long for a more adventurous partner; in this social context, her preferred man would likely be wearing a more modern cut of eveningwear: a dinner jacket. As Orchardson suggests, her marriage is one of circumstance or convenience; now she is in the gilded cage, her priorities have changed and she can see and long for a more suitable partner. Edward VIII, embodying sartorial expressionism, notes:

Throughout the greater part of the twenties the evening tailcoat...reigned supreme. For several years after the war it was still worn even at private dinners, while at the smarter restaurants and nightclubs...it was the absolute rule...the dinner jacket came out into the open, and by the end of the twenties it was worn

¹⁶ Peter Marshall, *The Black Tie Guide* <<http://www.blacktieguide.com>>

¹⁷ Marshall, *The Black Tie Guide*

¹⁸ Philippe Perrot, *Fashioning the Bourgeoisie: A History of Clothing in the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), p.167

¹⁹ Perrot, *Fashioning the Bourgeoisie*, p.167

²⁰ Shannon, *The Cut of his Coat*, p.5

²¹ Shannon, *The Cut of his Coat*, p.25

as a matter of course...we took to having it made – and the dress coat too – in a midnight-blue cloth in place of black.²²

The developments that led to this were happening in the 1870s and 80s as Orchardson worked: an early prototype for the shorter evening jacket is first recorded as early as 1865, made for Edward VIII's grandfather, Edward VII, by London tailor Henry Poole [See Fig.4].

With a nod to practicality, 'the *Gazette of fashion and Cutting Room Companion* simply stated, "People have not time now-a-days to change their dress three or four times a day";²³ ladies did, however. The homogenisation of male eveningwear with daywear, specifically cut and shape and fit, is a nod to this shifting attitude, although it still allows changing for dinner [See Fig.5]. Suited particularly to the comforts of home or a club, the dinner jacket aligned with the changing taste of daywear, whilst also serving to keep the distinctions of class and formality that eveningwear, and the act of dressing for dinner, stand for. In Orchardson's painting, this familiarity with changes is not apparent, though, and his wife seems affected by this. "The fashions of men are more influenced by the occasion of wearing, less by the precise moment of time at which they are worn."²⁴ Philippe Perrot provides a contextual example of dress advice for women: 'it is especially at balls that you should resist the ridiculous temptation to be the belle. At home, because of the pains you take, you believe that you are ravishingly dressed. Your family's compliments reinforce the illusion.'²⁵ In Orchardson's painting, she appears to have no such reinforcement; her age and demeanour suggest she'd rather be at a ball than at home with her husband.

Eveningwear developments occurred alongside developments in daywear: 'in a relatively short time, the lounge suit had emerged from its humble beginnings as casual sportswear to usurp the frock coat and become an all-purpose menswear for all but the most formal occasions.'²⁶ The success of this transformation in the shape of daywear is mirrored in the evening; the dinner jacket filled the more casual remit of the lounge suit, whilst retaining the distinguishing features of its evening-wear status: silk facings, striped trouser seams, and peaked or shawled lapels; 'the dinner coat is, of course, merely the evening version of the day lounge suit.'²⁷ To emphasise the shifting standards of eveningwear, 'by the 1890s some men had also abandoned traditional formal evening dress for lounge suits and sports jackets;²⁸ this remains common practice.

Contextually, what is now known as the business or lounge suit 'originated in the late 1850s and '60s from the lounge (or "sack") coat as an alternative to the distinguished but confining frock coat, which contoured at the waist before skirting away from the body, sometimes reaching below the knee...the shorter, looser, and boxier lounge jacket provided more comfort and was quickly adopted as informal wear.'²⁹ Also important to note is that tailcoats,

with fronts cut away to waist level, which had been a style for both day and evening wear before 1830, had by the beginning of the reign become mainly a style for evening wear. It still appeared for formal daytime wear in the 1840s, but

²² Hardy Amies, *The Englishman's Suit* (London: Quartet Books, 1996), p.25

²³ Shannon, *The Cut of his Coat*, p.183

²⁴ Anne Buck, *Victorian Costume and Costume Accessories* (Bedford: Ruth Bean, 1984), p.200

²⁵ Perrot, *Fashioning the Bourgeoisie*, p.97

²⁶ Shannon, *The Cut of his Coat*, p.176

²⁷ Amies, *The Englishman's Suit*, p.78

²⁸ Shannon, *The Cut of his Coat*, p.162

²⁹ Shannon, *The Cut of his Coat*, p.174

by 1860 it was an evening style only, and it remained the style of evening dress to the end of the century and beyond.³⁰

Writing in 1994, Amies notes that ‘the dinner coat is of course peccable: that is to say, faulty in lineage. Its lineage goes back only 100 years, half that of the tail coat.’³¹

Traditionally for eveningwear, ‘the waistcoat was often white, in many different kinds of silk at the beginning of the period, but black evening waistcoats were fashionable in the 1860s and 1870s; only in the 1890s did white Marcella or pique become the usual wear, the black waistcoat remaining with the dinner jacket.’³² It is this dinner jacket that is indicative of the new changes in formal traditions, and serves, by its omission, as a visual clue to Orchardson’s man’s attitudes and resignations. ‘After a period in the 1840s when black cravats were fashionable for evening wear, white remained usual for full evening dress for all the rest of the period, whatever the shaping of the cravat or tie... in the 1890s, when the collar became higher, many varieties of knot and a great variety of materials were used in ties.’³³ Anne Buck notes the fabrics used for eveningwear:

The pantaloons and trousers for evening wear at the beginning of the period were black cloth, and black trousers continued to be the only style for eveningwear to the end of the century...the evening coats were made of fine, milled cloth and from the beginning of the period were usually black or navy blue. Brown, dark green and mulberry colour might still appear but, by 1860, a black tailcoat was the universal evening uniform.³⁴

The new dinner jacket met the requirements of intimate and domestic events, whilst a tailcoat remained for much longer the necessary dress code for Balls and Banquets. *An 1887 issue of Vanity Fair* presciently asks ‘dinner-jackets have for some years been worn in country houses when the family are *en famille*; but I hear that the Prince of Wales appeared in one at Homburg at a ball given by an American. Is this the first move towards the disappearance of the unsightly tail-coat, which has too long been the only acknowledged style of evening dress?’³⁵ Orchardson’s scene embodies the environment established for the more informal coat, and therefore suggests the husband’s lack of social adaptability: ‘the new jacket was appropriate only for the most informal evening occasions, quaintly summarized by one source as “the club, stag parties, the dinner at home, card parties and private billiard bouts.”’³⁶ Importantly, ‘period descriptions commonly categorized the garment as a form of “negligee” and frequently implored readers to wear it only with black bow ties as they were regarded as less formal than the white option.’³⁷

In Orchardson’s painting, there is little comfort on display. The man remains stiff in appearance and the lady is clearly emotionally uncomfortable: clothing is a potent visual metaphor for this state. He is unwilling to adapt, both for his own benefit and for hers, and fear of change is a likely reason; Hardy Amies notes, with an appropriate caveat, that ‘ceremonies are useful to humanity. Clothes help the ceremony remain impressive. It does no good to anyone to

³⁰ Buck, *Victorian Costume and Costume Accessories*, p.188

³¹ Amies, *The Englishman’s Suit*, p.76

³² Buck, *Victorian Costume and Costume Accessories*, p.192

³³ Buck, *Victorian Costume and Costume Accessories*, p.196

³⁴ Buck, *Victorian Costume and Costume Accessories*, p.188

³⁵ Marshall, *The Black Tie Guide*

³⁶ Marshall, *The Black Tie Guide*

³⁷ Marshall, *The Black Tie Guide*

change unless it is for comfort, which does not destroy style in looks. The soft collar did not spoil the look of the dinner coat.³⁸ In 1888, *The Times of Philadelphia* noted that ‘the Tuxedo coat is evidently the garment of the future...it is a coat to lounge in. Physically and morally, its wearer is entitled to the privileges of demi-toilette. He may smoke, cross his legs, yawn, put up his heels, stretch himself and wriggle at ease with no coat-tails to disturb his post-prandial comforts.’³⁹

Mariage de Convenance’s narrative content of interpersonal relations and sartorial presentation raise questions about dress and propriety, and the sartorial prerequisites of the 1880s. There are clearly other factors at play, but by understanding the developments of the period’s dress, particularly formalwear when considering upper-class considerations, a more in-depth reading of the scene can be made. The depicted marriage is built upon weak foundations, with upward mobility the wife’s likely motivation; a change of clothing will not fix this. However, changes were happening: the dinner jacket’s development at this time, and Orchardson’s omission of it in his depiction of a particular social strata, represents that which the husband is not: young, exciting, and adaptable. Here, clothing serves as a subtle but powerful metaphor for the perils of a marriage of convenience: ‘Perhaps there is a tendency among Englishmen to judge a man too much by the shape of his hat or the kind of collar he wears,’ conduct author John Wannamaker confessed; ‘But one must remember that in England if you *wear* the wrong thing, you will probably *do* the wrong thing, and generally *be* the wrong thing.’⁴⁰

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³⁸ Amies, *The Englishman’s Suit*, pp.80-81

³⁹ Marshall, *The Black Tie Guide*

⁴⁰ Shannon, *The Cut of his Coat*, p.148

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Fig.2: William Quiller Orchardson, *Mariage de Conenance - After*, 1886, oil on canvas, Aberdeen Art Gallery, Scotland
<<http://www.bbc.co.uk/arts/yourpaintings/paintings/mariage-de-conenance-107527>> [accessed 4 February 2014]



Fig. 3: George du Maurier, *Inconvenience of Modern Male Attire*, 1891, cartoon, *Punch* <
[http://www.askandaboutclothes.com/forum/showthread.php?71122-Livery-How-to-Dress-Like-a-Servant-\(and-how-to-avoid-dressing-like-the-butler\)](http://www.askandaboutclothes.com/forum/showthread.php?71122-Livery-How-to-Dress-Like-a-Servant-(and-how-to-avoid-dressing-like-the-butler))> [accessed 1 March 2014]

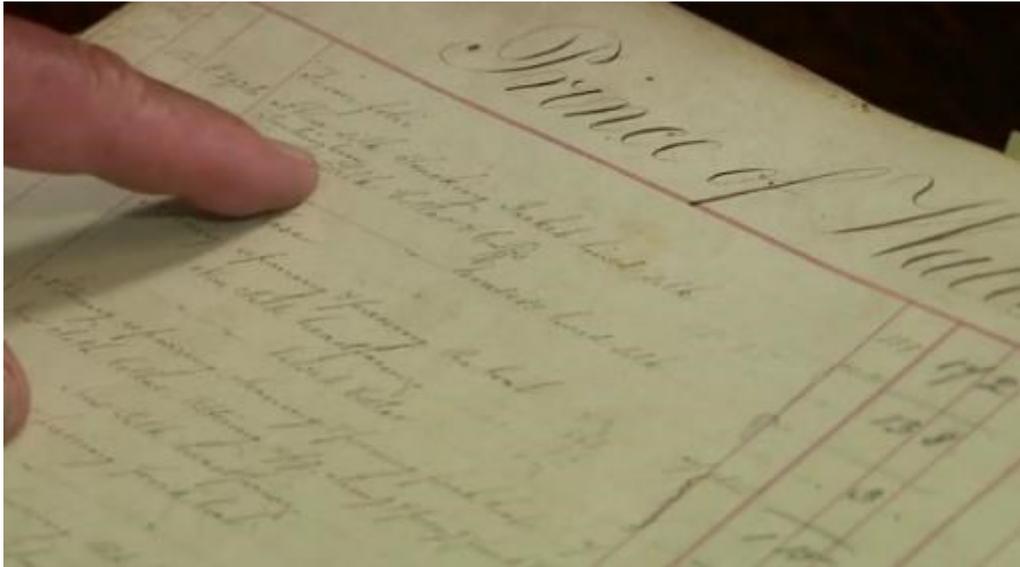


Fig.4: Henry Poole Ledger, 1865, photograph, Henry Poole <[http://www.blacktieguide.com/History/04-Victorian_Late_Etiquette_&_D\].htm](http://www.blacktieguide.com/History/04-Victorian_Late_Etiquette_&_D].htm)> [accessed 3 February 2014]

1902.] THE "FASHION" DRESS CHART. [FEBRUARY.										
DAY DRESS.										
OCCASION.	COAT AND OVERCOAT.	WAISTCOAT.	TROUSERS.	HAT.	SHIRT AND CUFFS.	COLLAR.	CRAVAT.	GLOVES.	BOOTS.	JEWELLERY.
DAY WEDDING, AFTERNOON CALLS, RECEPTIONS AND MATINEE.	Frock and Frock Overcoat or Chesterfield.	Double-Breasted, same Material as Coat, or of White Lines Dark.	Striped Woollen of Dark or Grey Tones.	High Silk.	White, with Cuffs Attached.	Military Pattern (Plain Stand-up) or one with Turned-down Points.	Black Ascot or Sailor Knot, with Small Pattern in White or Light Colours.	Grey Suede or Stone-coloured Kid.	Patent Leather Button Tops.	Gold Links, Pearl Pin.
BUSINESS AND MORNING WEAR.	Loafer of Morning, with Chesterfield.	To Man's Coat.	Of some Material, if with Loafer, Dark Striped Woollen with Mering.	Header with Loafer, and High Silk with Morning.	White Shirt, with Cuffs Attached or Detailed.	Double, with Loafer, Stand-up, with Mering.	Sailor Knot, Ascot, or One-over, in Black or Dark Shades.	Tan or Grey.	Gold.	Gold Links, Gold Watch Guard, Pearl or Plain Pin.
CYCLING, GOLF, AND SPORT GENERALLY.	Necktie, Single Breasted or Double Breasted Loafer.	Of Fancy Plain, Single Breasted or Double Breasted.	Knickers or Flannel Trousers.	Alpine or Golf Cap.	Coloured Flannel.	Hunting Stock or Polo Collar.	Hunting Stock or Ascot.	Heavy Tan or White Chamois.	Gold.	Links and Sporting Pin, Watch Guard.
AFTERNOON TEA, SHOWS, CHURCH, ETC.	Frock or Morning, Chesterfield or Frock Overcoat.	Double-Breasted, same Material as Coat, or of White Lines Dark.	Striped Woollen in Dark Shade.	High Silk.	White.	High Standing.	Ascot or Sailor Knot.	Tan or Light Grey Suede.	Patent Leather, Button Tops.	Pearl Pin, Gold Studs, Gold Links.
EVENING DRESS.										
BALLS, RECEPTIONS, FORMAL DINNERS, AND THEATRE.	Evening Coat, and Chesterfield or Frock Overcoat.	White Single Breasted or Black Double-Breasted.	Same Material as Coat, with Silk Sewing down Legs.	Open or High Silk with Cravat Band.	White, with Two-Strap Hole in Front.	Stand-up.	Narrow Cambric Bow or Stock Bow.	Pearl or White Glass.	Patent Leather, with Cravat Taps, or Patent Leather Pumps.	Pearl Studs and Plain Gold or Jeweled Links.
INFORMAL DINNER, CLUB, AND AT HOME DINNER.	Evening Jacket, Flannel, Chesterfield or Frock Overcoat.	Single or Double Breasted, same Material as Coat.	Same Material as Coat, with or without Heading.	Open or High Silk.	Plain or Plain White.	Stand-up or one with Turned-down Points.	Black Silk.	No Gloves.	Patent Leather, Button Tops.	Gold Studs and Links.

Fig.5: The Fashion' Dress Chart, 1902, print, Fashion <[http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Dress_Chart_\(Fashion\)_1902.jpg](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Dress_Chart_(Fashion)_1902.jpg)> [accessed 17 February 2014]