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Fashion's "Other Women:" Class, Nationality, and Dress in the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire

When Robert Mainzer arrived at the corner of Washington Place and Green Street on the evening of March 25th, 1911, he could barely believe his eyes. At first, he thought that some worker was throwing clothing dummies out the window of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory, a sweatshop which occupied the Ashe Building's eighth, ninth, and tenth floors. To his horror, he suddenly realized that these human forms were actually the bodies of workers themselves, jumping to their deaths to escape the flames that engulfed the industrial loft.[1] Overall, one hundred and forty seven people died in this tragic workplace accident, which brought Americans to a greater awareness of their mistreatment of the country's labor force. In fact, Mainzer's misinterpretation of the women as clothing mannequins serves as an apt symbol for how the strict working conditions in the contractor-based, irregularly paced, and poorly paid garment industry dehumanized its employees. Nonetheless, the clothing worn by these laborers can restore a sense of personhood to New York's young female factory workers by illuminating the complexity in their identities, undermining class-based assumptions about fashion and self-expression. Although contemporary accounts of the Triangle disaster associate stylish dress with the upper echelons of early-twentieth-century society, both newspaper articles and personal testimonies show that working class women in the garment industry sacrificed so they too could participate in sartorial consumer culture, laying claim to an aspirational American identity.

[1] "More Than 140 Die as Flames Sweep Through Three Stories of Factory Building in Washington Place," *New York Daily Tribune,* Mar. 26 1911, 2.

First, this paper demonstrates how the *New York Times* and the *New York Tribune* created a clear class delineation based on dress. Then, it shows how the distinctions these newspapers constructed were often just false assumptions, as both the Triangle employees' everyday behavior and reactions in a crisis demonstrated their concern for fashionable clothing, similar in style to wealthy women. Finally, it explores dress as a marker of class-based and national self-expression, which provided a way for laborers to both distinguish themselves from more old-fashioned immigrants and align themselves with better-off American consumers. This identity-forming role of fashion explains why young female garment workers bought the products of a capitalist industry that proved fatal to their loved ones and themselves.

Yet a year before the Triangle Fire killed and injured hundreds of men, women, and children, employees had already protested the sweatshop's oppressive conditions, and newspapers reporting on both this 1910 strike and the 1911 fire used dress as a shorthand for class differences between the workers and their rich supporters. When the laborers picketed for their rights in 1910, the *New York Times* characterized wealthy women who advocated against strikers' arrests as "fashionable allies," thus associating "women of a different station in life" with a higher standard of dress.[2] This distinction resurfaced after the fire in 1911. The *New York Tribune* reported that as victims' bodies piled up on the sidewalk, "an unusual scene was the number of automobiles with well dressed women as occupants that were in the vicinity and hung around on the outside of the crowds."[3] Here, the descriptor "outside of the crowds" clearly distinguished these smartly attired individuals from the workers whose deaths they observed. A few weeks later, the *Tribune* painted a similar picture of "women in lamb's wool coats, accustomed to ride in automobiles" when noting upper-class suffragist allies' presence at the

[2] "Actual Restraint of Trade," *New York Times,* Jun. 18, 1910, 8.
[3] "More Than 140 Die…," 1.

funeral procession to honor the fire's unidentified dead.[4] These images of the wealthy as well-clothed contrasted a characterization of the lower classes as "poorly dressed men and women," as the *Times* described the crowd at the morgue early in the morning after the fire, before "persons of some refinement of appearance…took and maintained their places."[5] Hence, both the white-collar-catered *Times* and the more reform-oriented *Tribune* constructed a clear sartorial barrier between social classes of New Yorkers.

This presumed exclusion of the working class from the world of fashion even surfaces in a discussion of shirtwaists, yet primary source accounts indicated that some garment makers did wear this popular product of the Triangle Factory. In her introduction to a document collection on the fire, historian Jo Ann E. Argersinger reports that at $3, a "moderately priced shirtwaist… was still beyond the reach of many of the workers who produced it."[6] Socialist reporter Allan L. Benson made a similar claim in 1910, when in his profile of labor leader and sweatshop employee Clara Lemlich, he lamented, "[Lemlich's mother] could make more shirtwaist than she could wear out in a thousand lifetimes, but…other women would wear the shirtwaists."[7] However, a 1909 account of factory life by Lemlich herself, included along with Benson's article in Argersinger's book, demonstrated that shirtwaists were not just worn by "other women." Lemlich did frame her statement similarly to Benson, explaining that "Some girls can buy only one, perhaps two shirtwaist a year – while they help make thousands of them."[8] Yet Lemlich's

[4] "40,000 Pay Tribute to Fire's Victims," *New York Daily Tribune,* Apr. 6, 1911, 1.
[5] "Sad All-Day March to Morgue Gates," *New York Times,* Mar. 27, 1911, 2.
[6] Jo Ann E. Argersinger, introduction to *The Triangle Fire: A Brief History with Documents,* 2nd ed. (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2016), 5.
[7] Allan L. Benson, "Women in a Labor War: How the Working Girls of New York East Side Have Learned to Use Men's Weapons in a Struggle for Better Conditions," in *The Triangle Fire: A Brief History with Documents,* ed. Jo Ann E. Argersinger, 2nd ed. (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2016), 63.
[8] Clara Lemlich, "Life in the Shop," in *The Triangle Fire: A Brief History with Documents,* ed. Jo Ann E. Argersinger, 2nd ed. (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2016), 63.

admission that working women could purchase shirtwaists challenged Benson's strict dichotomy between producer and consumer, while still highlighting the desperate and often prohibitive economic conditions that factory workers experienced.

To further corroborate Lemlich's claim, the *New York Times* provides direct evidence of working women wearing shirtwaists in a particularly class-conscious context. During a meeting of the Shirtwaist and Dressmakers' Union, just four days after the Triangle tragedy occurred, the *Times* reported that a "socialist oratory" by strike leader Leonora O'Reilly sent a fire survivor into an "attack of hysteria." In the struggle that ensued, "the girl's shirtwaist was torn from her back."[9] Therefore, even women who worked in the Triangle Factory itself owned the garment, as well as making them for pay. Thus, the shirtwaist serves as a case study to illustrate the tension between participation in and exclusion from sartorial consumer culture, experienced by the very workers whose labor fueled the industry. However, as Argersinger clarifies, this allegedly hysterical employee probably could afford a shirtwaist, because this "standard item of dress for women of all classes" was available at a wide range of price points. [10] Hence, the shirtwaist example has some limitations in regard to socioeconomic and sartorial implications.

While shirtwaists alone cannot fully illustrate the degree of factory women's engagement with current fashions, an examination of laborers' spending and victims' clothing further highlights their involvement with dress and adornment. Factory employees did not limit their fashion purchases to the relatively utilitarian shirtwaist, and the clothing expenditures of young, working-class women demonstrate their willingness to put money towards less cost-effective items of dress. In 1903, "sweatshop girl" Sadie Frowne earned $5.50 per week and spent $1 on clothing, allocating the same amount of cash to "put on plenty of style" as she paid to keep a roof

[9] "Faint in a Frenzy Over Tales of Fire," *New York Times,* Mar. 30, 1911, 1.
[10] Argersinger, 5.

over her head.[11] Newspaper accounts of the Triangle corpses indicate where this hard-won money went. The paragraph after the *New York Tribune* reported that one victim only made $3 per week, the paper recorded the police estimate that each corpse in the morgue had about $8 worth of jewelry on its body.[12] Additionally, the *New York Times* described that "one [of the victims] wore furs and a muff, and had a purse hanging from her arm."[13] The fact that the *Times* specifically made note of these fashionable items further conveys the degree to which Triangle workers' clothing undermined commonly held class-based assumptions about dress.

In addition to the revealing the relatively high monetary value of their garments, articles about the fire also showed the risks that Triangle workers were willing to take for their clothing. In their extensive next-day play-by-play of the fire, the *New York Times* described, "A girl threw her pocketbook, then her hat, then her furs from a tenth-floor window. A moment later her body came whirling after them to death."[14] The fact that this employee, who owned similarly stylish garments to the victim in the previous paragraph, attempted to first preserve her belongings while fleeing for her life underscores the deep concern factory workers felt for their dress. Accounts of those who survived also attest to the chances they took for fashion, even in a horrific set of circumstances. During the manslaughter trial of factory owners Max Harris and Isaac Blanck, ninth-floor operator Beckie Bursky testified that she put on her hat and coat before running out of the burning building. [15] Another ninth-floor operator, Beckie Rothstein, remembered that she went back into the dressing room to grab her outer-garments, even after she

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[11] Sadie Frowne, "The Story of a Sweatshop Girl," in *The Triangle Fire: A Brief History with Documents,* ed. Jo Ann E. Argersinger, 2nd ed. (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2016), 55.
[12] "100,000 Crowd to See Bodies at Pier," *New York Tribune,* Mar. 27, 1911, 3.
[13] "141 Men and Girls Die in Waist Factory Fire; Trapped High Up in Washington Place Building; Street Strewn with Bodies; Piles of Dead Inside," *New York Times,* Mar. 26, 1911, 1.
[14] "141 Men and Girls…," 2.
[15] "Vol. 1, sec. 5 (pp. 361-536). Testimony by female workers," in *Transcripts of Criminal Trial Against Triangle Owners* (Khell Center for Labor Management, Cornell University ILR School, 2008), 660, https://digitalcommons.ilr.cornell.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1004&context=triangletrans.

had already heard that there was a fire.[16] Unfortunately, some of the other women could not maintain their grasp on their prized garments during their escape. The *New York Tribune* reported that during a rescue attempt by New York University students, "some of the girls dropped their coats and hats while climbing to the top of the skylight…and they insisted upon going back to get their things." The paper then celebrated the young men's heroism, explaining, "The students, however, did not permit them to do it, but got down themselves and brought the lost things to the girls."[17] While this gender contrast contains implications of feminine frivolity, the sweatshop laborers' behavior actually served as a further testament to the value of clothing to the lower class. Indeed, if keeping up with trends demanded about twenty percent of a working woman's meager budget, as Sadie Frowne claimed, attempting to recover one's lost clothing represented a financially conscious act rather than a silly womanly folly.

Additionally, in less life-threatening situations than the fire itself, not only factory employees but also government officials emphasized the importance of preserving young garment makers' clothing. Clara Lemlich detailed the sacrifices workers were willing to take for fashion when their lives were not in immediate danger, relating,"If one of us gets a new hat, even if it hasn't cost more than fifty cents, that means that we have gone for two weeks on two-cent lunches – dry cake and nothing else."[18] She lamented that without proper storage in a dressing room, though, these precious purchases became ruined the moment they entered the dirty sweatshop.[19] Notably, this lack of an adequate dressing room was one of the few violations factory inspector G. I. Harmon reported in his examination of the Asch Building, which was in

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[16] "'Vol. 1, sec. 6 (pp.537-673). Continues with female workers' testimony, Dec. 11-12, 1911. Adjourned to December 13,'" in *Transcripts of Criminal Trial Against Triangle Owners* (Khell Center for Labor Management, Cornell University ILR School, 2008), 538-539, https://digitalcommons.ilr.cornell.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1005&context=triangletrans.
[17] "Cigarette Caused the Factory Fire," *New York Daily Tribune,* Mar. 27, 1911, 2.
[18] Lemlich, 56.
[19] Lemlich, 56.

hindsight certainly inadequate, considering it occurred less than a month before the Triangle Fire.[20, 21] In his 1911 testimony before the New York State Factory Investigating Committee, Harmon claimed that the law required dressing rooms in workplaces "if they have girls employed," in the same sentence he mentioned such safety measures as fire escapes, unlocked doors, sanitary toilets, and clean drinking water.[22] Harmon thus established these spaces, devoted to protecting clothing, as a basic necessity for working women, even as he failed to safeguard these employees' own lives. This characterization of well-maintained dress as essential contrasts employers' assumptions that women were "working for 'spending money' to satisfy their personal – and unnecessary consumer wants."[23] For the fact that a middle-class, male, and relatively ineffective bureaucrat expressed a similar concern for dressing rooms to Lemlich's reveals how necessary it was for workers to maintain their hard-won garments. In this light, the newspapers' association of only upper-class women with high standards of dress appears wholly inaccurate. However, this lower-class focus on clothing still does not fully explain *why* factory women were willing to sacrifice their meager wages and even their personal safety for expensive dress.

In addition to its economic value, the more fundamental reason that these workers showed such concern for fashion lay in its role as a bearer of identity. In the face of criticism, Sadie Frowne illustrated how clothing allowed laborers to assert their youth and Americanness. Unlike the condescension Argersinger cites from employers, though, admonishments of

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[20] "Testimony of G.I. Harmon, Inspector, Labor Department (p. 242-249)" in *Minutes of the Hearing of the New York State Factory Investigating Commission, Held in the City Hall at 10:30 a.m.* (Khell Center for Labor Management, Cornell University ILR School, 2008), 246, http://trianglefire.ilr.cornell.edu/primary/reports/GIHarmonTestimony.html.

[21] The factory must have had some semblance of a dressing room, because witnesses like Becky Rothstein describe going to that space when the fire started, but as even Harmon deigned to mention it, clearly it was insufficient.

[22] "Testimony of G.I. Harmon…," 244.

[23] Jo Ann Argersinger, *The Triangle Fire: A Brief History with Documents,* 2nd ed. (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2016), 94.

Frowne's fashion also arose within her own class. Frowne admitted, "Some of the women blame me very much because I spend so much money on clothes," with reference to the significant portion of her budget devoted to dress. She then added, "Those who blame me are the old country people who have old-fashioned notions, but the people who have been here a long time know better."[24] Therefore, Frowne conveyed that garment workers wore modern clothing in conscious contrast to other, purportedly more foreign and ignorant members of their class. For young women whose ethnicity, gender, occupation, and socioeconomic status placed them on the fringes of society, fashion thus communicated their self-understanding as Americans engaged in consumer culture.

In fact, newspaper reports on the fire victims' families exemplified just the marginalized status and outmoded, un-American image young working women tried to avoid. While describing the scene at the morgue, the *New York Tribune* remarked that "the old women were the most pitiful of all, as they slowly walked by, their heads wrapped in the heavy shawls Italians wear."[25] Therefore, the paper specifically associated an immigrant ethnicity with a particularly "other" form of dress. On the same day, the *New York Times* portrayed a woman on an unsuccessful search for "a girl named Bernstein" as "bareheaded and wearing a grey shawl."[26] These accounts gave an impression of lamentable foreignness, from which female factory workers like Frowne attempted to distance themselves. Months later, when an angry crowd of victims' families mobbed Harris and Blanck at their trial, the paper charged that a woman started the commotion by "drawing a black-bordered photograph from under her ragged shawl" with a "scream of rage."[27] These shawl-clad, bareheaded, and long-suffering mothers stand in stark

[24] Frowne, 55.
[25] "10,000 Crowd to See Bodies at the Pier," *New York Daily Tribune,* Mar. 27, 1911, 3.
[26] "Sad All-Day March…," 2.
[27] "Enraged Women Mob Triangle Waist Men," *New York Times,* Dec. 6, 1911, 24.

contrast to the smart muffs, furs, coats, and hats that both papers portrayed the Triangle victims as wearing, as they asserted their claim to an American identity through their dress.

The clothing of female factory workers not only communicated their sense of national belonging within a consumer culture, but young women believed that fashion offered them a way to blur class lines. Sadie Frowne saw stylish dress as essential for New York teenagers, eager to participate in popular entertainment, arguing "a girl must have clothes if she is to go into high society at Ulmer Park or Coney Island or the theatre."[28] Her mention of "high society" indicated that laborers regarded clothing as a possible means to bridge or at least obscure class divides. This understanding opposed the *Times'* and *Tribune's* views of fashion as a clear class distinguisher. Clara Lemlich echoed Frowne's enthusiasm for clothing, proclaiming "We're human, all of us girls, and we're young. We like new hats as well as any other young woman."[29] By emphasizing her fellow workers' similarity to "any other young woman," Lemlich established a sense of belonging within broader American society. Hence, she broke down the barriers that Allan L. Benson outlined when he characterized Lemlich's mother as "other" from the women who could afford shirtwaists. Lemlich does once again address the prohibitive wages of factory workers, though, when she sympathizes with the "many girls who were never able to buy a hat at all." She details how these unfortunates "take the clothes of the girls better off – those who earn $6 or $7 a week."[30] Therefore, Lemlich designated dress as a sign of achievement among working class women, whose meager compensation for their labor created hierarchies rather than strict homogeny within their own ranks. Thus, Frowne's and Lemlich's observations show how clothing took on an aspirational quality for female garment workers, who dreamed of

[28] Frowne, 55.
[29] Lemlich, 56.
[30] Lemlich, 56.

the same entertainment- and style-filled nights as any young, fashion-conscious New Yorker, even while trapped in a stuffy loft, sewing shirtwaists all day long.

However, just because factory workers' dress challenged class assumptions through appearance does not bring their lived reality of grueling hours, dangerous work, and constant poverty any closer to the experiences of the elites whom they sartorially emulated. Thus, fashion conveyed how laborers aspired to be more like upper class women or desired to have the value of their work – and personhood – acknowledged, when both were not the case. In fact, factory women's style choices actually invited criticism from other classes. As Argersinger explains, the large hats that Lemlich described were "ridiculed by middle-class observers." Yet the historian asserts, "women workers wore hats to proclaim their respectability and connection to American culture and society."[31] Indeed, the *New York Tribune* depicted trial witnesses like Mary Cisco and Kate Alterman wearing enormous hats, in a public setting where they had to defend their merit as workers and women.[32] This contrast between workers' fashion as a source of pride and a target for mockery illustrates the class tension in female factory employees' dress during the early twentieth century. On the one hand, lower class laborers affirmed the dignity of their work by confidently clothing themselves in stylish garments like furs, muffs, and hats, showing that they mattered just as much as the other women for whom they sewed. On the other hand, this engagement with fashion, especially when women spent nearly beyond their means, represented a buy-in to the very capitalist system that oppressed them.

Indeed, Triangle employees' clothing could also convey just how much suffering this economic structure caused. Numerous survivors testifying at Harris and Blanck's trial were

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[31] Argersinger, 9-10.
[32] "Says Door Was Locked," *New York Tribune,* Dec. 9, 1911, 16; "Triangle Defense Begins," *New York Tribune,* Dec. 19, 1911, 5.

"dressed in deep mourning" for lost family members and friends.[33] And during the funeral parade, the *New York Times* detailed how women "marched without hats," shedding their prized accessories to pay respect to their fallen sisters.[34] One survivor, clad in all black, carried a banner that declared "March 25, 1911. A Sacrifice to Capitalism," poignantly pointing out the abuses of this labor system.[35] Therefore, even as factory workers' dress challenged contemporaries' class-based assumptions, it also complicated their relationship to the economic and social structures which governed their lives.

Yet either as a subversion of or a support for capitalism, the Triangle workers' experience with clothing demonstrates how dress, often characterized as a surface-level frivolity, can reveal the deepest facets of a person's identity and aspirations. Fashion can especially allow marginalized women like Clara Lemlich, Sadie Frowne, the funeral protestor, and the thousands of their fellow unheard workers to use their very bodies to display their sufferings, pride, and desires, as their voices were drowned out by the constant churning of the industrial machine. Thus, to offer new insight into the lives of early twentieth-century makers *and* wearers of garments, historians must take fashion just as seriously as the Triangle workers did themselves.

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[33] "Girls Fought Vainly at Triangle Doors," *New York Times,* Dec. 12, 1911, 4; "Exhibit Shot Bolt at Triangle Trial," *New York Times,* Dec. 15, 1911, 5.
[34] "40,000 Pay Tribute…," 2.
[35] "40,000 Pay Tribute…," 2.