Reader/viewer response to the rhetoric of costume

Patricia Lee Moore

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READER/VIEWER RESPONSE TO THE RHETORIC OF COSTUME

A Thesis
Presented to the
Faculty of
California State University,
San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
in
English Composition

by
Patricia Lee Moore
September 1990
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1 August 1990
Abstract

Semiotics is the scientific study of social discourse where meanings are both generated and exchanged. Semioticians attempt to classify sign-systems and their codes, interpret their many meanings, and explore the relationships between them. Modeled after the structuralists' studies in linguistics, semiotics recognizes many levels of languages, including the non-verbal language of wearing apparel. Clothing images, similar to any metaphoric language, derive their meanings from association with abstract messages or codes and follow the same basic principles of language (i.e., an orderly way of making meaning). The roots of these clothing messages and codes can be traced historically through the art of Western culture.

Clothing becomes a form of culturally influenced rhetoric. Since rhetoric deals with the way a sender's message will influence a receiver, theater, which has been historically instrumental in influencing people's attitudes, offers an opportunity to demonstrate the relationship or interdependence between specific sets of clothing codes. Educated "speakers" of this silent language, such as writers or directors of plays, can send carefully coded messages that manipulate and influence their audiences.

Closely related studies in narration and theater by people such as Barthes, Elam, Esslin, Scholes, and Silverman, who have theorized on language, structure, and meaning, suggest that the structural analysis of clothing can be compared to the structure analysis of narration. Clothing as a metalanguage is compared to Barthes' levels of narration. Areas particularly noted in this study are those elements that narration shares with theater—coherence of costume to action and the rhetorical point of communication.
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Introduction

That human beings are "storytellers" is an ancient concept evolving from the oral tradition through early performances of drama to the written language. However, that humans are also "symbol users" is a less understood and a more complex concept. The ability to make and use symbolic representations of our universe is an abbreviated system of coded communication we humans have developed. Humans do not always deal with the world directly but can use language metaphorically to construct a "poetic" world (Hawkes 15).

One of the richest symbolic languages that has developed through the centuries is the social discourse of non-verbal information that takes place through the rhetoric of clothing. Clothing images become symbols after becoming associated with abstract messages or codes. However, clothing images are not stable carriers of that particular meaning but take on coloration from their surrounding relationships. "The true nature of things may be said to lie not in the things themselves, but in the relationships we construct, and then perceive, between them . . ." (Hawkes 17). According to Janet Emig, a scholar who has studied the composing process:

Only if we can make [symbolic] representations of our experiences do we possess what is probably the single most basic resource for engaging in writing or, indeed, in any form of composing: combining and transforming perceived elements into coherent and sometimes fresh wholes, aesthetically pleasing to ourselves and to others. (64)

The concept that the system of language evolves from relationships and not objects is a relatively new idea and forms the basis of a fundamental way of looking at language that is concerned with the perception and description of how language is structured. Relationships are primary. This simply means for
the language of clothing that any article of clothing by itself has little significance but is meaningful only in respect to its relationship in its context with all other articles of clothing. Ordering such relationships is the nature of structuralism. A structuralist seeks to discover “the permanent structures into which individual human acts, perceptions, stances fit . . .” (Hawkes 18). A semiotic approach to understanding the rhetoric of costume is based, therefore, in structuralism.

Through a set of very simple costumes from Tennessee Williams' Cat on a Hot Tin Roof, for example, theater affords us the opportunity to examine how sets of clothing codes operate and how certain messages are conveyed. This is necessary because clothing, of course, is a visual “performance text.” Very little is written in most playwrights' stage directions about costume. A discussion of costumes through narrative and theater appears to offer a most promising opportunity to demonstrate the relationship or interdependence between sets of clothing codes and the process of understanding the language of clothing on several levels. Although three versions of Cat are available, the 1985 American Playhouse production more closely follows the playwright's revised dramatic text and will be used in this study.

“Theater” in this study will refer to actual “performer-audience transaction” and not the written text. As in any developing science, or theoretical school, problems develop with terminology. In The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama, Keir Elam points out two separate texts in the theater—"the performance text" ("produced in the theater") and the "dramatic text" ("composed for the theater") (2-3). Since this is a study of visual signs, the performance text, which is frequently based upon a dramatic or literary text, is of primary importance. Thus, semiotic meaning is an amplification and extension of linguistic meaning.
Roland Barthes' *The Fashion System*, an exploration of the individual parts of a costume, is also an attempt to demonstrate through semiotics how a set of clothing symbols functions and serves as a good item-level foundation. Building on Barthes' analysis, this study approaches and analyzes the elaborate system of the signs of costumery in the round, so to speak, and takes into consideration the many relationships that factor in and affect meaning. This will not only emphasize the multi-layering of symbols' meanings, but will also demonstrate, in a less technical manner than Barthes', how subconscious responses are manipulated by an author's or a director's mastery of semiotic codes, and how realizations are accomplished by the reader/viewer.

The term reader/viewer is used to emphasize the complex and unique efforts required to encode and decode systems of visual signs. The question "where does meaning take place?" in visual instances is explored from many aspects. Many choices are available to both the sender and the receiver of clothing communication, but what are the codes connected with the choices? Is the wearer aware of how or why such choices are made? Martin Esslin, in *The Field of Drama*, notes the vast influence of theater in our lives today and the importance of semiotics in understanding how the individual elements operate to form the total meaning (49). Theater is used to explore the relationship of the different levels of clothing communication, in particular the coherence of costume to action and the rhetorical point of communication.

Consider the many messages or codes conveyed by the slip Maggie wears in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*: Although this slip is not very revealing and everything under this slip is firmly anchored (soft, moving flesh would have been considered vulgar), this costume acts as a "symbolic equivalent of nudity" in a time period when nudity was censored on stage or in film. As a result, "the
lacy satin slip became an erotic signal in real life," according to Alison Lurie in *The Language of Clothes* (247). While the slip in *Cat* is obviously meant to be an icon of a sexy woman, it also functions as a sign that sets Maggie apart from everyone else. Nudity, symbolic or not, has always emphasized vulnerability (she is powerless in this patriarchal society). White in Western cultures is traditionally associated with angels or virginal brides. Red, the time-honored Western symbol of passion, does not appear in *Cat*. Thus, because of the color code's subtext, the audience is more apt to accept the premise that Maggie is not playing the loose woman but rather is a sensuous wife who desires a child.

The audience when the play was first produced (1955) probably felt uncomfortable and embarrassed by Maggie in her slip. This level of discomfort has changed in the past thirty-five years, partly because of repetitive exposure to the nude female form in our culture. However, exposure to the nude male form still evokes uncomfortable subconscious feelings in the contemporary community of viewers, as is the case with Peter Shaffer's *Equus*. These responses will later be referred to as the "signified" of the sign. As the previous example suggests, the rhetoric of clothing, whether it is consciously understood or subliminally absorbed by an audience, is multifarious.

Bert States, a dramatic phenomenologist, points out that, when approaching the theater semiotically, "anything deliberately put there for artistic purposes . . . becomes an event in a self-contained illusion outside the world of social praxis but conceptually refer[s] to that world in some way" (19). Another way to think of this is that every object on the stage can and does have more than one meaning, either symbolically and/or realistically.

Ruth Amossy's intent in "Toward a Rhetoric of the Stage" is to show the nature of the interaction between the image and the written text (49). Both are
independent and yet interdependent. Following this lead, this analysis examines the combination of what is spoken and the "visualization of the verbal elements" to show how the costume reinforces how the message is given or received. By using such a simple, and yet highly documented source, such as costume, the intent here is to enlarge the understanding of Barthes' "rhetoric of the image" as well as to explore what others have added to, in Amossy's phrases, the "semiotics of visual communication" and the "non-verbal art of argumentation" (50).

Twenty-five hundred years of art, theater, and descriptive literature make clothing a most reliable vehicle to study how symbolic systems are created and function. Furthermore, since humans find it almost impossible to separate their concepts of self from their clothing, clothing symbols are among the most significant of symbols.
Chapter One
Clothing as Symbols—A Historic Approach

Clothing has played an important part in the human need for public procession, or social discourse. From earliest times, people enjoyed getting dressed for religious and civic holidays and walking around looking at each other and showing off their wealth. Later, this need to look at each other in order to identify with their peers expanded into their art, theater, and literature. Thus, clothing has been instrumental in forming humanity's perception of itself and in fostering and developing a sense of community. People who want to identify with a certain social group would adopt metaphorically (consciously or unconsciously) the social characteristics of others by mimicking their dress. Some consider this the prime reason for clothing—not for modesty or protection, but for identification with and assimilation into a chosen community. Similarly to language, signification of clothing occurs only through social discourse.

Symbols, according to Walter Fisher, a communication expert, are a part of the codes humans have set up to recount (as in "history, biography, or autobiography") and account (as in "theoretical explanation or argument"). Fisher proposes further that the term "homo narrans" should be used to represent the essence of human reasoning, citing Burke, Cassirer, and Langer as authorities. Fisher believes that "the idea of human beings as storytellers indicates... that symbols are created and communicated ultimately as stories meant to give order to human experience...." (6). Thus cultural or social values are formed and become part of an individual's social mythology.

A social mythology is actually a structure developed by the imagination, according to Northrop Frye in The Educated Imagination. Frye contends that "you can't understand anything or take any part in your society without
Besides self-expression and social participation, constructing the world by imagination (through art, literature, or social costume) is one of the prime functions of language (27). Through these constructed myths, humans attempt to identify with their surroundings. Since social life is really based on the imagination, social mythologies and, therefore, symbols are important factors for a sense of well-being. Through repetition, myth “persuade[s] people to accept society’s standards and values” (140). People must identify with their surroundings to feel comfortable.

One of Frye’s main points is that literary myth precedes social mythology. This same power will be accorded to clothing symbols (with references to art and theater) in this study. Clothing, through cultural discourse, has helped to define people’s perceived “reality” through the repetition of certain values assigned to certain clothing images. These individual and/or cultural values become associated with a symbol and are what the symbol regularly conveys. Once established, “The meanings, instead of preceding the objects . . . now trail them, like the tails of comets” (States 22). For example, in Barthes’ study, fashion magazines project the values of the perfect woman in their models’ images, through both narrative and image. Women who follow fashion believe that by mimicking these images, they assimilate the values projected. Repeated often enough what is projected is now accepted. “[T]he inclination of the sign is to become more efficient, to be read easily” (States 25).

However, this does not mean that the symbol and its meaning are stable. Although people inherently understand symbols, many do not realize that symbols are organic and are part of a “living language,” colored by context, setting, and the cultural background of the reader/viewer. As such, meanings
associated with objects change over a period of time. Attitudes toward clothing and the evolutions of clothing myths are traceable through history.

People's perceptions of themselves have been closely associated with art, according to Anne Hollander, an art historian. Their attitudes toward clothes, including their values, beliefs, and emotions, can be traced through art history and can be shown as an influence on Western culture. Hollander's point is demonstrated by looking at nude studies. Before photography captured the actual image of the human form, most sculptures and paintings depicted an idealized clothed and unclothed human. This idealized form is what humans have assimilated into symbols and myths. Although the nude study has been a favorite subject for thousands of years, Hollander contends that nudes are perceived as having the idealized figure of the period in which they are artistically conceived and, therefore, have the "ghosts of absent clothes" (86). For example, art and photography in the late 1880s and in the 1890s "insisted heavily on a [nude or clothed female] figure with an arched back and an outthrust behind," mimicking the fashion of the period (134).

Clothing also fulfills a psychological need of people. Hollander contends that art proves that nakedness is not a universally accepted state for humans (xiii). Cloth is basic to human needs and has been called a "second skin." Or, as Barthes more interestingly notes, "functioning simultaneously as its substitute and its mask, [cloth] is certainly the object of a very important investment" (Fashion System 236). People have a psychological need to be dressed appropriately (not just covered). Clothing serves as a guide to a person's individuality. A common biblical notion is that humans cover their bodies in shame, but a more modern concept is that clothing stems from a "belief that a person is more than his or her body" (Steel 45).
Art has romanticized the idealized human form, and people have striven to emulate it, giving rise to attitudes and beliefs about how clothes should appear in substance, shape, or line. For example, the purpose of the large, stiff, awkward clothing shapes in Elizabethan and Restoration society was to conceal, rather than to reveal, the natural shape. The naked body of these periods was associated with the “bestial” nature of humanity and was, therefore, best hidden. A clothed, “civilized” body’s form would be “rich, elegant, graceful, beautiful, and would encourage similar qualities in posture and movement” (Glenn 295). Many times the image of “self” is more important than the reality of “self,” demonstrating that semiotics of clothing cannot be studied apart from the human subject because humans define their own myths through their clothes.

Clothing has also been instrumental in the development of class stratification. From the time of draped classic Greek statues, humans have associated their bodies with cloth. Even in nude studies, the drape has been an integral background of art for centuries. By the Middle Ages, elaborate drapes of visual substance were included in most paintings, even though hanging drapes indoors or covering windows was not a fashion at that time. This juxtaposition of luxurious cloth with human figures has metaphorically served to bond the two. From this period on, clothing has been associated with luxury and wealth (Hollander 26-31).

Clothing, then, can function as a symbol to display wealth and to send out whole sets of codes persuading the community of the wearer’s importance and social status. Jane Tompkins, a literary critic and historian, has said of the verbal code: “When language is believed to have an overwhelming influence on human behavior, then mastering its techniques and exercising ethical control over its uses must of necessity become the paramount critical
considerations” (204). This can be applied equally to the non-verbal symbols of clothing. The fact that countries have, from time to time, tried to control the use of luxurious cloth by imposing sumptuary laws demonstrates its rhetorical value to society as motivated signifiers symbolizing the social status of individuals.

One form of class stratification, sexual difference, has continually been an organizing principle of clothing. Tight stays, high heels, hobble skirts, or large bulky gowns have exerted a physical power over the movement of women and have been associated with keeping them subjugated in the paternal order. Another theory, however, suggests that women control the idealization of their own clothing because of a much stronger need—the need to attract a mate.

Valerie Steele’s thesis in Fashion and Eroticism is that “Because clothing is so intimately associated with the physical body, at the deepest level all clothing is erotic” (9). She contests many of the myths associated with clothing, including the myth that the Victorian woman’s costume represents that she was “both sexually repressed and socially oppressed.” Instead, she contends, “Victorian fashion revolved around an ideal of feminine beauty in which eroticism played an important part” (3). In reality, both theories have historic merit, but, more importantly, they demonstrate the function of symbolic idealization of clothing in society.

Theater has also been instrumental in influencing Western attitudes towards the idealizations of clothing. “The ‘natural’ beauty of cloth and the ‘natural’ beauty of bodies have been taught to the eye by art, and the same has been the case with the ‘natural’ beauty of clothes” (Hollander xiii):

... whipping capes mean masculine dash. Inside the movie frame, a fluttering skirt, a weighty curtain, and the special beauty of a sailing ship have acquired their emotional power through centuries
of images that have translated these physical actions of cloth into poetry and meaning for generations of Western eyes. (Hollander 81)

Clothing, influenced by technological advances in this century like motion pictures, brought about the final liberating influence on women’s styles. In the early 1920s when movies made the public aware of how bulky feminine styles limited physical movement, women’s clothes showed a reduction in overall volume. This was “partly due to the visual need for the completely clothed body to be satisfactorily seen in motion” (Hollander 154).

Doubtlessly, theater mirrors symptomatic changes in society (Esslin, Anatomy 103). The clothing of the “flower children” of the sixties filtered upwards through the entire class structure. Even a modified version of the man’s business suit, a “leisure suit,” made a brief appearance. Leisure, of course, indicates the cessation of work, while suit indicates the opposite. This garment signaled people’s temporary dissatisfaction with the social norms of materialism:

Costumes alter the routine types of interaction by removing the customary forms of responsibility and accountability for one’s activities and facilitating spontaneity and easy sociability. They thereby enable the description of extraordinary states of affairs, permit moral holidays, and serve as a channel of catharsis or the expression of a desire for change. (Nathan 4)

While the paradox of the leisure suit lasted only a brief moment in fashion history, other clothing has shown a remarkable resistance to change. Out of the power structure and the need for law and order developed a type of costume readily recognized in our society—the military uniform. As an example of one of the more stable clothing signifiers, this type of clothing, which includes police uniforms, has changed little over long periods and thus has a more time-honored tradition. The uniform’s second-order signified (its implied meaning) is
its power or authority which gives the officer instant status. However, small
details of the uniform such as the attached insignias are first-order signifiers
(their images have an agreed upon, literal meanings) and evoke their own set
of signifieds. Thus, for people who need to know the code, the stripes and
insignias will convey a whole set of information such as rank, where the
individual has served, and special expertise.

Through symbolism, clothing has the power to persuade and manipulate
large numbers of people. “[T]here is a close link between the general beliefs of
a society . . . and the political climate of a nation. Changes in manner and
mores may ultimately change the very temper of politics.” Theater is “an
instrument of social innovation and in that sense it is an institution subversive of
the status quo” (Esslin, Anatomy 101-04). This is how the seeds of a moral or
immoral costume have been developed, such as with Maggie in her slip. In
modern times many of the social functions of theater are now compounded
through the use of movies and television because of the large number of people
they reach.

Clothing is of the first order of importance in recording the changes in
ideas about cultural values supporting psychological needs, class stratification,
political views, and other factors. Thus, clothing as symbolic meaning has been
continually in flux, but its history has been accurately preserved through art.
Therefore, the signifiers and the signified meaning of each article of clothing
can be narrowed to what Barthes calls an “instrument of meaning” (“The
Fashion System” 57).
Chapter Two
Understanding Semiotics

While the terms semiotics and semiology are both used to refer to the "science of signs," the first term is preferred by English speaking peoples. Semiotics is a part of the general movement of structuralism and is one of the tools utilized in literary criticism. "The semiotic critic situates the text somewhat differently, privileges different dimensions of the text, and uses a critical methodology adapted to the semiotic enterprise" (Scholes 110). Linguistics, the study of human language, serves as a model for semiotics. However, the current debate over whether semiotics functions under linguistics, or linguistics functions under semiotics, demonstrates the infant state of this science. In this century, semiotics has produced a terminology that allows a practical (although imperfect) approach, with a worthwhile methodology, to analyze an elaborate system of "signs" like those involved in the language of clothing, particularly as it functions in drama.

Kaja Silverman's The Subject of Semiotics is particularly compatible to this study because it presents a compact history of semiotics while maintaining a modern structuralist's position that: 1. semiotics cannot be studied apart from the human subject; 2. psychoanalysis is central to semiotics; 3. signification occurs only through discourse; and 4. sexual difference is an organizing principle (vii-ix).

Historically, Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913), generally considered the father of modern linguistics, divided the system of signs into two parts with a signifier (the actual image-sound) and the signified (the concept that the form evokes). The relation between image and concept is the sign. The American philosopher Charles S. Peirce (1839-1914), in independent work, followed a
different line of reasoning and increased the number of signifying relationships charted by Saussure. One of his more radical assertions is that the human subject "does not only know the world through language; he is himself the product of language" (Silverman 18). Peirce's signifiers are: the icon, which represents what it signifies by a direct image (picture) of the object; the index, which is the "real thing or fact," such as a pointing finger; and the symbol, which is "a sign whose relation to its conceptual objects is entirely arbitrary" (Silverman 19-20).

While Saussure was trying to stabilize the sign, Peirce and later semioticians agree that the symbol is arbitrary or conventional. This simply means that signs are not static and that an endless chain of signifiers continually produces a variety of additional meanings according to the relationship between the signs and in terms of the context. Saussure's followers (notably Barthes) extend the notion of the linguistic sign or word to all signs, verbal and nonverbal.

Roland Barthes (1915-1980) was fascinated by nonverbal language. He expanded semiotics by closely examining motivated signifiers and expostulating their rhetorical function. Barthes' first-order signifiers are denotative or literal in meaning; second-order signifiers are connotative with the meaning suggested or implied; and motivated signifiers exist where "ideology or myth consists of the deployment of signifiers for the purpose of expressing and surreptitiously justifying the dominant values of a given historical period" (Silverman 27). "Literature is a prime example of a second-order signifying system since it builds upon language" (Silverman 26). This is called a metalanguage since it is a second "language" that speaks about the first. Clothing is also a metalanguage, in which the individual object becomes a
symbol whose "meaning contain[s] a whole system of values: a history, a geography, a morality, a zoology, a Literature." In short, it becomes a motivated signifier (Barthes, "Myth Today" 103). To prove and illustrate his theories, Barthes wrote numerous articles on objects as motivated signifiers.

Unfortunately, independent research has developed independent terminology and this has inhibited an understanding of semiotics. For example, what Barthes describes as "connotation," Peirce calls "interpretant." And what Barthes called "myth" and "ideology" in his early works corresponds to "cultural codes" in S/Z, a later work. However, this very factor of the arbitrariness of the sign (relation between image and concept) illustrates the unstable relationship between form and content—the exact point semioticians are trying to make. The content (meaning) stays the same; the relation is what changes (Barthes, "Myth Today" 103).

In explaining the differences among the various critics, Robert Scholes, in *Semiotics and Interpretation*, says that the semiotic method decodes narratives by grouping or putting into classes a wide range of structures "that enable and constrain meaning." In literature, for example, a text is composed of both the story and discourse. The story is only considered in the past tense and closed, while the discourse is in the present. A story refers to written documentation and discourse "is rhetorical, and related to oral persuasion." These types of distinctions are made in order to standardize analysis. The semiotic critic is not free to make meaning but must interpret within the actions, events, or diegesis (110-11).

Basically, the goal of semiotics is to divide a set of objects into elements to be distributed among formal general classes for analysis (Barthes, "The Fashion System" 57). However, semioticians go beyond classifying objects
(something a phenomenologist might do) to interpreting “the reality denoted by the sign” or the sign’s meaning (States 20). They believe all intelligibility depends upon codes or systems of thought. A specific example of this is the color code, one of the most important levels in costume analysis. One whole level of symbolic language would be lost if the only colors were black and white. Historically, humans have given color symbolic value, “either to identify social strata or castes, or in symbolic terms for mythological or religious ideas.” For example, in China, yellow was reserved for the emperor because yellow was a symbol of “supreme wisdom and enlightenment.” In Western traditions, the Catholic church has its symbolic colors, including “cardinal crimson and the papal white” (Itten 13). Through the ages, color coding has become built into culture. Few people actually study the meanings of color, but, when people of the same culture are polled, they can usually come to an almost universal agreement on their understanding of its meaning:

- **White** is the symbol of light, purity, chastity, innocence;
- **Black** expresses darkness, authority, evil, mourning;
- **Red** suggests blood, heat, fire, anger or power, passion;
- **Blue** symbolizes coldness, serenity, spirituality;
- **Yellow** suggests heat, liveliness, gaiety. (Sellman 110-11)

Color, therefore, has a language of its own, providing signifieds. For example, dark colors are usually considered more authoritative than light colors, but they can also represent evil. In early western movies the villain wears the signified black hat while the hero always has a white one. Brick, therefore, is dressed in light colors, particularly blue, throughout Cat. This is a clue that hints we are not to mistake him for a villain. Maggie and Big Daddy are dressed in white, a color associated with wealth and power in the South. The audience subconsciously knows that this is a play about Maggie and Big Daddy, rather than about Brick. Big Mama is dressed in black, giving her an
aura of dignity, presence, and increased authority. (Black could mean other things so other signifiers like facial expression must be present here, to satisfy the playwright's purposes.) However, the audience is told through color not to discount Big Mama.

Color, of course, is only one of many codes in an analysis of clothing or costume. Since structuralism makes form one of its primary concerns, clothing can be examined under a "multiplicity of standpoints—historical, psychological, sociological, ethnological, [and] aesthetic" (Barthes, "Introduction to Structural Analysis" 252). "Clothing is very much a social artifact—a form of communication—which can best be understood by sociological concepts" (Nathan 1). Since clothing derives its meaning only through social interaction:

Sociology then becomes the science linking "speech" and "messages" with their situation, their social context, individual and cultural elements, etc. It's obvious that there are, within distinct social groups, more or less stereotyped and codified "speech" habits. That is why "such importance is being given nowadays to the ideas of "idiolect" of "writing" in literature—these are in a way "subcodes," intermediary stages between language and speech. (Barthes, "Semiology and Cinema" 36-37)

As shown in Chapter One, on a broad cultural level, the issue of class stratification unfolds an umbrella over the entire system of clothing codes. Clothing rhetoric is used to emphasize authority of certain privileged groups over the less privileged. Clothing communication is a complex subject, involving subtle layers of meaning. While all would not consciously note the level of detail of Barthes' study, all humans would subconsciously make note of such obvious elements of clothing as:

Condition: richness / ragged; dirty / clean;
Color: dark / light;
Texture: soft / stiff; shiny / dull; thin / bulky;
Cut: masculine / feminine; stylish / out-of-style;
young / old; full / skimpy.
Although these elements may be considered separately, they can also fall under the broad category of class stratification. In describing even simple categories of clothing, the code system would quickly bog down with multiple signifiers. Garments of quality fabrics that are well-fitting and well-cared-for speak of wealth and power as well as some level of awareness and self-consciousness. A class system does exist in this Western culture, and clothing is a clear and distinct sign of this class system.

One of the most obvious divisions of the power structure is that of gender. In Silverman's study, which is based on the work of Freud and Lacan, "sexual difference [is] an organizing principle not only of the symbolic order and its 'contents' (signification, discourse, subjectivity), but of the semiotic account of those things" (viii). In order to examine a text—a set of signals in a visual and linguistic system formed by diction and syntax—it is necessary to segment a time and place since these codes are dependent upon audience, purpose, occasion, and material. The following is a limited demonstration of what sign and sign systems are present at particular moments in one video version of Cat on a Hot Tin Roof. Even though the women in Cat appear to have the upper hand in this 1950s Southern setting, they are still bound by roles defined by a patriarchal society. ("Lacan . . . asserts that the signifying activities of both the unconscious and the preconscious are centered on the Oedipal experience, and that the Western symbolic order derives its coherence from the phallus or paternal signifier" [Silverman 131].) This cultural influence dictates highly defined feminine and masculine modes of behavior and dress codes. These conditions exist partly because of social conditioning and partly because of certain unconscious choices on the part of both genders.
On a personal level, one could begin by pointing out that how one cares and dresses “self” has long been considered a sign of one’s emotional well-being or self-esteem. For example, Brick in *Cat* is portrayed as a confessed alcoholic who stands with a glass of alcohol (first-order signifier) in his hand throughout the entire play. How does the viewer know that Brick is not just another drunk? The expensive silk pajamas he wears is a signified to broadcast that he is someone special, someone of wealth. The first index image of Brick in scene one is of an invalid with a first-order signifier of a broken leg. Even though he has literally and symbolically backed out of society (he is an alcoholic in a bathrobe), we know all the second-order signifier trappings of a successful man (Maggie refers to his Shantung silk suit with sapphire cuff links) are just waiting for him to participate in life again. Considering the cast as a piece of clothing, the broken leg also works as a second-order signifier of a broken phallus symbol, showing he has backed out of his role as husband and head of the household.

On an interpersonal level of social discourse, intentions and motivations must always be considered. Big Mama, as matron of the family, sets the tone of dress for the others in the play. Through the playwright’s specific instructions, she is wearing in iconic realism an expensive dress and a half a million dollars in jewels (Williams 42). A code of gracious living also exists in this Southern landed country house, as all the players are semi-formally dressed even though they are in the comfort of their own home, albeit hosting a celebration. While this type of dress is common enough for the times, the extravagance of the jewels might suggest a family trying a little too hard to appear successful. The dialogue later tells the audience that this is a formerly lower-class family who has attained wealth.
Under the societal level is the subcultural division of institutions, including occupation, political, and religious affiliation. Big Daddy, his son Gooper, who is a lawyer, the preacher, and the doctor (all the "real" men in Cat) are wearing men's suits. According to Lurie, a “modern sack suit . . . diverts attention from [a male's] physical qualifications and focuses attention on his economic and social status” (215). Values representing the paternal position—repressiveness, privilege, potency, as well as the church, the state, the education system—all are reflected through the men's clothes (Silverman 135). Although Gooper seems weak and ineffective in dealing with his father, the lawyer image looms around him. He has the education and support of big business. Also, as father of six children, he has proven himself a potent husband who should be considered for the power position. According to Lacan, the paternal signifier, Name-of-the-Father (in this play Big Daddy), is identified with the symbolic father in possession of the phallus, or power (Silverman 181). Big Daddy resists putting on the houserobe, symbolizing his resistance to stepping down from his role as head of the household. This would represent decline, loss of responsibility, or the exchange of the "crown."

These are, of course, only a few of the meanings present in Cat. In theater, the total act of communication involves several layers of meaning. Since theater involves a concrete representation of the action taking place, and many levels are taking place simultaneously, several levels of codes must be encoded at the same time. This is unlike written narrative, which "operates at any given instant only along a single dimension" (Esslin, Anatomy 17).

Jonathan Culler maintains that the task of a structuralist, according to his understanding of Barthes, is not to interpret certain works, but to "make explicit the underlying system which makes literary effects possible" (106). In other
words, Culler believes there should be more studies into "how" these systems work. A great deal of semiotic effort has been applied to the study of narrative by Barthes, Jakobson, Scholes, and others and will form a good basis from which to launch this comparison of clothing to language.
Chapter Three
Clothing As Narration--A Technical Approach

Frye says that humans have three different reasons for using words: to name and describe things, to participate socially, and to envision the world as they want it to be. Art, including literature and theater, is a part of the world humans construct, as opposed to the world they see (17-23). Humans, through literature and theater, use language (all language is symbolic) to construct their world through narratives. Narration or storytelling forms the basis by which humans compare what they have experienced to what others have experienced. "Literature owes its existence to the codes that we invent to process the world and to create it" (Hawkes 112). Clothing is but one level of human language and as such forms its own narratives.

Clothing, as demonstrated in Chapter One, is a highly developed symbolic language. Although it is non-verbal, it functions in the same way as all languages, as a system of codes bound by rules that take into account the intertextuality of all clothing codes that have been historically developed and modified. And narratives are fully able to be carried by such "fixed or moving images" like clothing (Barthes, "Introduction to . . . Narratives" 251).

Since a narrative is not just a collection of unrelated parts, it shares a common structure that is open to analysis. Critics have attempted to structure narrative, but its form is so broadly universal that one cannot hope to master all utterances. What may be produced deductively, according to Barthes, is a working model through linguistics. In other words, one cannot make "reference to an implicit system of units and rules," but one can "distinguish several levels or instances of description and . . . place these instances within a hierarchical integrationary perspective" ("Introduction to . . . Narratives" 252-58).
In one of his earlier works, Barthes proposes three levels of description in the narrative—the levels of functions, actions, and narration. He explains function as the smallest unit of meaning or connotation, actions as “towards a structural status of characters,” and narration as being connected to the “point of communication” or related to the sender and receiver (“Introduction to... Narratives” 260-81). These three levels of description of narrative will be referred to as Level of Functions, Level of Actions, and Level of Narration in the remainder of this study.

Barthes’ efforts in The Fashion System explore clothing’s smallest unit of meaning, an exercise to classify and analyze a system of objects known to possess an “intellectual existence” (“On The Fashion System” 43). His study amply demonstrates that communication of non-verbal language functions through associations in the same way that any other linguistic system does and is a rule-governed process that produces meanings. In his study Barthes found that he had to include the written language that describes clothing because, after struggling with the whole system, he found he could only proceed through verbal language. “Fashion” exists only through people’s discussion of fashion. “Hence, this study actually addresses neither clothing nor language but the ‘translation,’ so to speak, of one into the other” (The Fashion System x). Barthes’ efforts toward investigating a grammar for garments is impressive. He assigns a structural description to fifty different genera and suggests various interpretations and possible rules. The Fashion System, although difficult to understand, is available as a model of this type of intensive investigation. This study served to confirm what he and other semiologists knew, that “sets of objects that are somewhat complex do not signify outside language” (“On The Fashion System” 45).
Barthes' investigation in *The Fashion System* is comparable to a linguist's study of words. It also fulfills Frye's first reason for language—to name and describe things. Barthes' study investigates the Level of Functions of the "description of narrative" and, rather than look at individual articles of clothing, this study will consider the level of "sentences," or discourse. The level of narrative discourse—the Level of Actions—operates through events narrated.

According to Scholes, narration is a special class of symbolic activity defined as having a reader/viewer situated in a different time-frame from the narration (57). He believes that the "primary effort in attending to a narration is to construct a satisfying order of events" (62). Since this study deals with the visual, it is possible to demonstrate through theater "those elements which theater shares with narrative, i. e., [the] exposition of a series of actions linked by causal relationships" (Segre 40). The proairetic (action) code determines the sequence of events within a narrative and "is the 'glue' which makes certain that clusters of events will follow each other in a predictable order" (Silverman 262).

The visual discourse of the costume must bring into being an equivalent of the action. In theater the changing of costume may signal a change in the state of affairs, and/or it could signal the movement of time. Through clothing, the time of day might be shown, or the actor might age several years. An entire change of theatrical identity signals a change of personality (Hayman 34). Because of the special nature of clothing to signify class stratification, costume is capable of signaling vast amounts of information. The organization of costumes as movements of characters in relationships to each other might be as complicated as projected rhetoric emphasizing a social message (such as who is in power), or as simple as an excessive display for emphasis.
The narrative of costume is central to the action in *Cat*. First, the audience is focused on Maggie in her slip, trying to seduce Brick to participate in life. Big Daddy's resistance to putting on the housecoat signals his struggle to retain power, while Big Mama, in her black dress and jewels, dominates the stage through size and volume, when she is present. She is a force not to be discounted and keeps reappearing even though Big Daddy keeps telling her to go away. Goober in his suit and Sister Woman in her maternity clothes are ineffective contenders for power but could win by default. Therefore, they are all dressed properly for their roles.

Although Barthes believes all codes are oriented around action, he further subdivides them in *S/Z*. This is an effort to explain the symbolic order humans have developed through groups of connotative codes. Connotation is an important element in semiotics. In his earlier works, Barthes believed the action of language occurs on two levels, that of denotation and that of connotation. In his later work, however, he rethought denotations, saying closure and singularity are not possible and that what we call the last connotation is only the denotation we rest upon for the present. One of Barthes' main points is that connotations encourage people to believe certain popular concepts (true or not) through repetition (Silverman 238). These concepts are repeated through a culture's narratives.

In addition to the action code, Barthes designated four other codes or levels of connotation as subdivisions in the study of narrative: semic, hermeneutic, symbolic, and cultural.

Semic codes are usually recognized as a "common nucleus" of connotations in which are located the themes in the text. This might be in the form of subtle hints. Maggie in her slinky slip is referred to as a "cat" on several
occasions. At one point she symbolically claws the back of the couch. As a cluster of connotations cling to a particular costume, the person is characterized (Scholes 100). The semic code also functions to define power relations. Maggie is exposed and vulnerable while the men are fully clothed and protected.

On an abstract level, rather than social referents, clothing can connote general attributes to humans, such as military dress designating a person as virile, adventuresome, or powerful. At the same time, on an organizational level, military dress or, indeed, any type of formal uniform, designates a special hierarchy and/or abstract relationship among its members (Nathan 26).

On a nostalgic or romantic level, “Western” clothing might indicate a longing for a more simple time in the past. “On a more abstract level, it indicates, not an actual historical scene [real cowboys never wore fringes and silver studs down the legs of their pants], but instead the quality of laissez-faire individualism and virility” (Nathan 26).

Hermeneutic codes refer to enigmas. The “code of puzzles plays on the reader's desire for ‘truth’ for the answers to the questions raised by the text. . . . Together with the code of actions it is responsible for narrative suspense, for the reader's desire to complete, to finish the text” (Scholes 100). The complexity of the clothing code allows for many opportunities for making apparently contradictory statements since the visual code lends itself to manipulation and distortion as much as any verbal signs might (Nathan 2-3).

While little thought may be given to the hundreds of viable clues that are synthesized automatically, let one incongruous clue slip in and the audience perceives it as “an intrusion, an irritant” (Esslin, Anatomy 52). For example, Big Daddy in Cat is generally characterized by a white linen suit, the traditional
dress of a Southern plantation owner. However, in the American Playhouse video of *Cat*, the actor portraying Big Daddy enters the set wearing an incongruous costume of the white linen suit and a baseball hat. The hat is taken off immediately, but the question of its first-order or second-order signified is puzzling. The modern baseball cap was adopted as the naval “command cap” during World War II and has come to signify hard work (Nathan 16). Perhaps the cap was meant to make Big Daddy more human, or to align him with Brick’s interest in sports. At any rate, this one brief clothing symbol creates confusion.

A second enigma is Big Mama’s jewels. Not many people wear their family heirlooms at home, even during family birthday parties. As a symbolic subtext beneath the realistic surface, are the jewels Big Mama’s hard-won battle ribbons? Her valiant medals of honor for putting up with Big Daddy all these years? Perhaps the jewels suggest as a second-order signifier that Big Mama has accepted her position.

While the audience enjoys solving narrative puzzles in the theater, they will not tolerate confusion. Viewers need certainty and closure to complete the processing of narration. They must be able to imagine the missing parts, acknowledge any unusual use of costume, and grasp the meaning of what is implied.

The symbolic code relies upon recognizable groups or clusters of meanings that are repeated for emphasis. For example, direct opposites are set up in parallel arrangement constituting a rhetorical contrast of ideas. Meaning comes from some “initial binary opposition or differentiation” such as psychosexual opposition. Antithesis of this type is a “privileged figure in Barthes’ symbolic system” (Scholes 100-01). In *Cat*, Maggie and Sister Woman
are set up as opposites; Maggie is barren (and bare skinned) and Sister Woman is the "monster of fertility" (in maternity clothes) (Williams 22). In the family power struggle, they both are compared to Big Mama, who is no longer interested in subjugating herself but wants the power herself (dressed in black and wearing the family jewels). The men are also set up as opposites. Brick is a suggested homosexual, and Gooper is the father of six children. Gender, of course, is an organizing factor in this Southern setting.

Cultural codes "constitute the text's references to things already 'known' and codified by a culture" (Scholes 100) and are an "authoritative voice which speaks for and about what it aims to establish as 'accepted' knowledge or wisdom" (Hawkes 118). Male and female clothing patterns have shown considerable flux in the last few years, but at the time of the writing of Cat, Southern "ladies" were girdled, wore close-fitting, starched, ironed cotton dresses in light colors, and would not consider going to a social event without their hair sculptured, wearing high heels, hose, gloves, and hat. On one level, this restrictive style limits the movement of women and therefore limits their power in this patriarchal society. On another level, it is seductive.

Barthes' codes are just a few of the possible subdivision semioticians have investigated in order to give structure to narratives. The very complexity of symbolic language, or in this case metalanguage, serves to demonstrate the multiplicity of meanings and the inter-relational factors taking place simultaneously between them. In order to understand meaning, the reader/viewer must systematically go through a series of decisions, from one possible meaning to another, until satisfied that what is understood is logical and coherent.

Although linguist Roman Jakobson in his classic essay, "Linguistics and
Poetics," is not talking about narrative in particular, he discusses the pansemiotic features that all systems of signs perhaps share with language. Jakobson, a supporter of Peirce, speaks of verbal communication, but his "coherent sixfold functional matrix of language" lends itself to a demonstration with visual objects as well, as noted below with an example from Cat. His six functions are:

1. emotive or expressive function (focusing on the addressee),
2. conative or appellative function (focusing on the addresser),
3. the referential function (focusing on the context),
4. the poetic function (focusing on the message),
5. the phatic function (focusing on the contact),
6. the metalingual function (focusing on the code). (145-46)

Working with Jakobson's system and noting that the "little black dress" in the 1950s (prescribed by the playwright) was considered sophisticated, chic, and a power statement, a semiotic example examining the reality denoted by the sign (or what Peirce calls the referent and Barthes terms the motivated signifier) would possibly be something like the following: Big Mama (the addresser) sends a message (her emotions via her mode of dress) to the addressee (her family and friends, but also the audience). To be operative, the message (formal dark dress, expensive jewelry) requires a context (a. refers to the formal occasion, birthday party, or b. signals her importance), seizable by the addressee; a code (understand the gravity of the occasion, or understand the actors importance), and a contact (attract attention, or a demand to show emotional support by the mimicking of the formal dress).

Costume, as the above model demonstrates, is a visual element participating in relationships and communicating vast amounts of information. The six functions involved here, it must be noted, are never equally emphasized at the same time. Jakobson's main point appears to be that meaning "is
capable of considerable degrees of change, depending on how [it is] used, and where [it occurs]" (Hawkes 83).

The study of signs may be approached from many different directions. Linguists like Jakobson, as well as anthropologists, psychiatrists, phenomenologists, and literary critics, are all very interested in the way symbols operate and have much to learn from one another. They are, as States puts it, "workers in the same field [semiology] harvesting different kinds of crops" (21).

Costumery is a metalanguage; the costume as a whole, similar to the sentence as a whole, is what makes meaning. The costume, as the sum of its parts, represents the "discourse" of the costume, and discourse produces narratives. This type of discourse cannot, of course, be divorced from its narrative rhetorical qualities, or Level of Narration, which will be examined in the next chapter.
Chapter Four

The Rhetoric of Theatrical Costume

Rhetoric is generally associated with persuasion. In *The Rhetoric of Film*, John Harrington explains the study of rhetoric as “focusing on ways of putting together the various components and complexities of languages in order to bring about effective communication.” He also points out that while rhetoric is frequently associated with negative connotations, it is not “inherently deceiving” (2).

Rhetoric should also be thought of as intentional. Esslin believes “Signs in the usual sense are tools deliberately employed to establish communication, tools through which one person . . . intends to convey a meaning or a message to another person” (*The Field of Drama* 44). This chapter explores the deliberate level of rhetorical discourse of theatrical costume, including a study of both how responses are manipulated by the director and how realizations are accomplished by the viewer and corresponds to the point of communication, the Level of Narration explored by Barthes.

Esslin explores briefly many sign systems in *The Field of Drama*. Since television has increased the influence of dramatic technique in our culture, he emphasizes the value of semiotic studies such as the rhetoric of theatrical costume:

> To clarify the role each of these elements plays in creating the ultimate meaning of the performance thus clearly is an extremely serviceable and helpful tool both for the practitioner of drama and the member of the public who wants to be critically aware of what he has been seeing and experiencing. (10)

> “The [costume] is a [visual] element participating, as any other textual unit, in the strategy of the dramatic dialogue” (Amossy 50). Although costume is mainly thought of as a vehicle to the building of “character” in the human
subject, costume must carry a full share of the meaning of the play. Costumes, functioning as symbols or signs, may carry a wide range of rhetorical values and assumptions, signifying the intended social messages of the author or director.

Roland Barthes in “The Diseases of Costume” explains what he believes is necessary for a “good” costume. While a good costume might be one of “historical truth or good taste, faithfulness of detail or pleasure of the eyes,” he proposes that the costume must, above all else, support the social gestus of a play (“the external, material expression of the social conflicts to which it bears witness”). In this functional, intellectual role, the costume’s substance, form, color, and movement—everything it articulates—must help us to read the gestus. He continues, “everything in the costume that blurs the clarity of this relation, that contradicts, obscures or falsifies the social gestus of the spectacle is bad” (89).

Play directors use costume, a shorthand of theatrical code, not only to “characterize” the actors (utilitarian) but also to promote their social messages (referential). A large part of this persuasion takes place through the identification of symbols with certain causes, such as class stratification. Thus, “theater [is] a process of mediation between [the] artist and culture, speaker and listener; theater becomes a passageway for a cargo of meanings being carried back to society (after artistic refinement) via the language of signs” (States 6).

Unusual uses of costume are called “foregrounding,” a term theatrical structuralists borrow from linguistics. As a technical device employed by directors, this forces the audience to take note and discontinue their automatic responses (Elam 17). The slip Maggie wears in 1955 represents this type of foregrounding. Luxurious underwear was something people only fantasized
about in this post-war period. Maggie is given status in the play, as indeed every other member of the family is, by expensive clothing. However, Maggie spends a great deal of time in a beautiful ivory lace slip. While the slip is obviously meant to be an icon of a s-e-x-y woman, it also functions as a sign that sets her apart from everyone else. This draws the audience's attention to her as someone not quite a part of this family; exposed as she is, it emphasizes her vulnerability. The slip is a signified that she is a person who will risk exposure to get what she wants. The partially clad figure historically has had an associative mythology of shame and weakness. Maggie's figure is understood to be erotic. Elam believes that unusual prominence serves not only to foreground such elements, but also serves to distance them from their "codified functions" (17). States says this about "the problem of what vision does to vocabulary, and what vocabulary does to vision": "If you want to investigate a new aspect of human experience you can't use the old vocabulary of signs because . . . the old vocabulary is the old experience" (99-100). Any stage object is only a "representative" of its class and, therefore, may be used more freely to connote new and unusual referents.

A director's main job is to see that all levels of meaning are coherent, in particular the interaction between the dialogue and the visual performance. Elam examines several levels of coherence in his analysis. He points out that semioticians who work with the visual text (i.e., the theater) are "faced with two quite dissimilar—although intimately correlated—types of textual material: that produced in the theatre and that composed for the theater" (3). Using Elam's work as a model, this chapter examines the textual coherence or the degree of textual control to which the performance discourse of costume in Cat is subject. This theatrical system—the costume—although subject to many codes, is
examined in light of Elam's main categories of textual coherence: action, referential, discourse, logical, rhetorical and stylistic, and semantic. His "performance text" is equated with the costumes worn (in this case), and his "dramatic text" is related to the script. Any messages, verbal or otherwise, are supported by the rhetoric of the costume. The performance text is dependent for both its encoding and decoding on a flexible number of systems and on a set of codes (182-84).

The coherence of the action to the costume display is of major importance in theater. "In both cases [theater and narrative] we find actants or characters performing actions which are linked together temporally and causally. The overall patterning of events, too, . . . must show a certain unity and coherence" (Segre 43).

The costumes in Cat, although kept to a minimum, function effectively in the central action. Maggie enters and begins to take off her clothes. The audience is thrust into an unusual situation. Because of the intimate nature of the relationship between a performance and an audience, individuals in the audience possibly feel the discomfort of a stranger who has suddenly come upon someone in her private chamber in a state of undress. Maggie spends a great deal of time in this undressed state, primping and grooming before the mirror, examining her body for flaws. Her words later confirm what her actions convey—that she feels she has arrived at her current social position of wealth because of her superficial qualities. She tells Brick, "You can be young without money, but you can't be old without it" (Williams 54). Maggie seductively takes off her nylons, which have a special connotation in this post-war society. Not only are nylons a transparent fabric of a sensuous tactile nature (essentially an
undressing of the undressed), as a symbol of wealth, they were also exchanged for sexual favors during the war. There is irony in Maggie's forced celibacy.

Brick, in his pajamas, also reinforces the message that this is an unusual state of affairs. Indeed, this is a family in crisis, faced with a changing of the guard. Maggie, in purchasing the bathrobe for Big Daddy, is trying to orchestrate the transition, but Big Daddy is just as resistant to putting on the bathrobe as Brick is resistant to putting on his suit.

The referential coherence of costume is particularly adaptable to a "world-creating" role. This type of dialogue exerts great "referential and co-referential controls" in establishing a readily identifiable and "consistent universe" (Elam 183). The family in Cat does not exemplify the aristocratic Southerners they are trying to imitate. The text hints that they are not from "old-line" money. Only the two young women who have married into the family give the family such social status. Maggie represents a poor cousin of "old-money," while Sister Woman evidently is a true blue-blood.

In "real" life, as in the theater, people are constantly responding to color's referential elements which suggest the mood and atmosphere of the entire setting. These are "subliminally absorbed impressions that underlie the consciously perceived elements of our experience" (Esslin, Field 20). Brick, in the very first scene in Cat, is both dressed in and surrounded by powder blue, silver, and white, according to the playwright's instructions. This second-order signifier suggests the cold, frigid manner in which Brick has boxed himself. The cool colors could also symbolize Brick's desire to be antiseptically clean and to shed the ugly rumors alluding to his homosexuality. According to experts in the field, color is one of the most important elements of design. Many times people will react first and most strongly to color (Rosencranz 31). At one point in Cat,
the sky glows an eerie green. This could suggest decay and illness to the audience. Big Daddy's cancer looms over the visual setting as well as the discourse.

The costumes must also be geared toward a overall theme or clear "topic" of discourse coherence. The event is a celebration. Big Daddy is not only home from the clinic, but it is his birthday as well. There is a formal mood as the family and guests are dressed for Sunday dinner. As a subtext, however, Maggie and Brick spend a great deal of time in intimate wear. There are many gaps between what is being said and what is being done on stage. While Maggie's words convey what she intends to do (aggressively fight for her share of the wealth), her costumes reveal her subconscious motives (she tries to seduce her prince into waking up and saving her). Actions, in lieu of dialogue, will be believed when there is a discrepancy between the two. Also, there is a strong tendancy for humans to believe what they see, rather than what they hear.

Logical coherence requires the audience to locate and interpret the logic of the temporality and causality of the sequence of actions or events. When interpreting a narrative text, then, the reader/viewer processes it as a diegesis. (113). The diegesis always seeks to arrange events in chronological order. In fiction a "cause-and-effect relationship links the temporal elements in any narrative sequence. . . .This means that if the events in a story are presented in their temporal sequence, much of our [interpreting] is devoted to establishing the causal connections between one event and the next" (62-63). The costumes in Cat follow the logical order of events, not only the past events, but also the anticipation of future events. The reader/viewer needs logical coherence to complete the diegetic processing of textual materials.
The individual contributor's rhetorical and stylistic coherence is also a factor in any performance. "Any dramatist, director, actor or designer of note will impose, over and above the constitutive and regulative rules, his own subcode or idiolect, the ensemble of personal, psychological, ideological and stylistic traits which makes a written text recognizably [his]" (Elam 55). Williams' style is that of tragic social alienation or isolation, psychosexual discontent, and frustration of individual needs, all of which appear in Cat. He emphasizes cultural and economic changes. His drama is often developed as a configuration of opposing rhetorical forces, frequently of a sexual nature and frequently involving the patriarchal family.

The French anthropologist, Claude Levi-Strauss, states: "The rules of kinship and marriage dictate the positions and possibilities open to all members of the group. Each individual is thus born into an already defined symbolic system" (Silverman 180). The patriarchal family in Cat is thrown into role confusion because the paternal signifier--Big Daddy--has become impotent through illness. This role confusion is clearly shown by the various states of dress and undress of the characters.

The semantic coherence refers to how people connect what is visually and textually presented to their own personal experiences. Experiences provide the background from which people base interpretations. "We perceive and measure any pseudo-experiential or fictional context presented to us" (Scholes 31). For example, when people identify with a certain actor on stage, they metaphorically assume that character's identity and begin to fantasize how that character might think. Visually they feel comfortable and can identify with that character. Perhaps their manner of dress or expression allows them that comfort. Perhaps the character reminds them of someone they know well.
Narratives use language in a way that associates words with ideas and experiences. Associative language develops figures of speech and “uses figures of speech, like simile and metaphor, to suggest an identity between the human mind the world outside it” (Frye 38). Metaphor is a particularly important concept for the study of human language. Simply stated, it is implicitly comparing or juxtaposing two unlike objects. Language does this continually, but only through the repetition of the metaphoric pair does the meaning latch onto the image. “It is new input into language from nonverbal experience that keeps language from decaying” (Scholes 24). For example, the continuous wearing of all-white clothing by the upper class in the summer in the early part of this century equated white clothing with the people who were wealthy and did not have to work. Costume used in such a selective manner today facilitates metaphorically a romanticizing of past historic periods or cultures. Not only does reconstructed dress of the past express romantic ideals, it can also express political or cultural ideology. “The sartorial equivalent of metaphor consists of borrowing of the social characteristics of another—status, relationships, and attributes—by adopting his dress” (Natan 13).

Directors manipulate clothing to draw desired responses from the audience. Clothing functions as a large part of the audience’s identification to what is happening on stage. This use of metaphor helps to achieve intimacy when people relate to certain characters or ideology. Directors and playwrights use metaphor to close that physical distance between the stage and the audience. However, the stage also functions as a presenter of new metaphoric pairs. The audience’s perception is free to wander. “Areas not enlarged upon, moments of emptiness, reference to events not represented, are entrusted to reconstruction on the part of the spectator” (Segre 44). “Every performance of
interest will involve a complex dialectic of code-observing, code-making, and code-breaking” (Elam 55). Each reader/viewer must supply missing parts of metaphors. For example, one must acknowledge any extraordinary uses of costume and explicate or unfold what is implicated or folded into the code of action by their presence.

The reading of clothing cues naturally varies from community to community. Non-verbal language, then, elicits a viewer-response similar to the reader-response theories of Iser, Fish, and Culler. Meaning is produced, but it is produced by each individual according to context and community. The semiological approach does not interpret symbols but describes their many meanings, which are an “institutional matter, a function of conventions that are publicly agreed upon” (Tompkins xviii).

The power of the theater actually demonstrates the power of symbolism in people’s lives. While watching a play, movie, or television program, people so identify with what is happening on the stage that they often completely forget about “self.” They are engrossed in receiving and deciphering messages, both verbal and non-verbal. However, most are not conscious of the various identities they assume as viewers. The performance text’s real power lies in messages inscribed at a subliminal level. “In the dialectic closeness/distance, participation/ abstention, there is to be found perhaps that aspect of revelation and liberation which Aristotle called catharsis” (Segre 44). “The theater is the one place where society collects in order to look in upon itself as a third-person other” (States 39). At a play, the audience sits with anticipation and waits to be immersed in how other humans experience the world. Although theater, similarly to other arts,
presents itself as a secondary modeling system, it does differ from them by the fact of its inserting its spectators with its system... As a witness at least, the spectator finds himself inside the modeling system. Instead of being placed in front of it by the writer, he must withdraw himself from the suggestion of presence, and make sure to keep a distance. (Segre 44)

Although in essence the performance is a closed communication system, there is a psychological overlap of that closed system and the audience. The audience is first of all governed by their expectations. "As a perceived narrative begins to imply a special kind of pointedness or teleology, we recognize that it is a story, and we regard it with a certain set of expectations about its expressive patterning and its semantic content" (Scholes 60). "The spectator's cognitive hold on the theatrical frame, his knowledge of texts, textual laws and conventions, together with his general cultural preparation and the influence of critics, friends, and so forth, make up what is known in the aesthetics of reception as the horizon of expectations" (Elam 94).

To be theatrically competent, people must not only be familiar with the kinds of codes and subcodes, but, more importantly, they must realize that such codes exist (Elam 87). For example, Freudian principles of interpretation are a part of our common understanding in today's theater. As sophisticated viewers, we realize that these codes are functioning in Cat.

Theatrical objects have a special place in the study of semiotics. The audience, through convention, knows that everything on the stage is an intentional sign. "On the stage things that play the part of theatrical signs . . . acquire special features, qualities and attributes that they do not have in real life" (Elam 7). What is being explained are motivated signifiers. Beyond basic denotation, "the theatrical sign inevitably acquires secondary meanings for the audience, relating it to the social, moral and ideological values operative in the [mutual] community" (Elam 10). The first principle of theatrical semiotics is that
on a stage the signification is all-important (Elam 8).

How can a sign take on specific meaning but just not any meaning? It is a matter, of course, of conventions, and the code of historical authenticity in costume will, of necessity, take second place. Costume designers choose between the different pieces and accessories on the basis of their effects. This notion of effect suggests modes of dressing that are not random or haphazard and lends weight to the argument that clothing is a language and can be structured and studied. However, the methods are rarely agreed upon. For example, semiotic investigations that trace the meanings readers/viewers give to costumes and the effects they experience are more valid than a semiotic study that tries to capture a designer’s decisions to create certain costumes. Culler suggests testing implicit knowledge of a reader’s judgment about meaning. Although he speaks about readers of written texts, this could be just as well applied to audiences. He suggests they be questioned about their understanding of “meaning, well formedness, deviance, constituent structure, and ambiguity” (105). In other words, this type of investigation reflects better what a sign or symbol actually means to someone, rather than what an intended meaning might be.

The audience encodes the significance of symbols, filters them through their own sets of beliefs, and assigns to them their own meanings. They have read the costume-text, have undergone an experience, and will reflect on what they have experienced. Perhaps they have been influenced or persuaded. Perhaps they have responded in the manner the playwright and director had intended. To look at costume as rhetoric is to understand many meanings. Part of an “audience’s pleasure derives from the continual effort to discover the principles at work” (Elam 95).
Harrington talks about visual literacy and the process of understanding works on several levels. He asks, "how do they [signs] work upon a viewer, affecting or molding his beliefs and attitudes?" (vi). The viewers' ability to respond to and deal with what they meet during the viewing experience depends upon how well they have acquired the interpretive codes of their culture.
Conclusion

Humans’ basic need to communicate has evolved into highly structured levels of metaphoric languages. The language of clothing is only one level in a multilayering of languages that includes other non-verbal systems such as facial mime, gesture, movement, make-up, and hairstyle. This study has demonstrated how such a metalanguage has evolved by tracing humans’ attitudes towards clothing through art. The importance of clothing in the development of class stratification has been traced through history and shown as a basic human organizing principle, as suggested in Chapters One and Two. Clothing is one of the most significant levels of language because clothing has been instrumental in the basic way humans perceive themselves. These observations suggest that humans’ perceived selves are more important than their real selves.

The transposition of object to belief to myth takes place when certain ideas become associated with an object. The object of clothing becomes a sign or a symbol after meaning has been associated with it over a period of time, and it becomes an accepted shorthand used by the community or culture in which it has originated. Once accepted, the meanings trail the object.

However, the meanings are never completely stable. Clothing statements can be diverse and ambiguous, but this is also a part of clothing’s appeal as a signifier connected to social issues of class stratification. Such associative languages can never been frozen in text and seem to have a life of their own. Through time, metaphoric meaning of clothing changes, just as all languages evolve.

An honest approach to the study of the rhetoric of clothing is to say that the density of signification is almost without end, but it is not without meaning.
This study emphasizes that such meanings are not random. In fact, meanings must be highly structured for communication to take place. The "science of signs" or semiotics is an infant science that studies the structures of such sets of objects. Since some of the most intensive studies to date have evolved from the science of linguistics through the study of narrative, this study takes advantage of these prior investigations to compare the language of clothing to the language of narrative.

In Chapter Three, previous studies by Barthes designate three levels of narrative. The first level, the Level of Function, has already been investigated by Barthes in *The Fashion System* and serves as a good foundation for the analysis of individual items of clothing. This study explores the second and third levels—the Level of Actions and the Level of Narration (the rhetorical point of communication).

Action is of the utmost importance in narrative and theater. In theater the "information-bearing role of language is normally constant ... [and] carries the action and 'world-creating' functions forward in some way" (Elam 180). Clothing is instrumental in moving the action forward through its silent but powerful messages.

Plays share economies of communication through the symbolic meanings of costumes. Having to convey messages in short, two-hour periods, playwrights have become masters of these economies. The whole idea of a play is communication, to understand perfectly what is supposed to be understood at precisely the time it is supposed to be understood. The symbolic messages of costume contribute an immense amount of information without taking up one second of time in a performance. Once the viewer is alerted to the vast richness of alternate meanings in symbolism, people find it highly
entertaining to search for the delightfully allusive multiple messages. While cultural differences account for slight message variation, our vast collective knowledge of the rhetoric of costume magnifies our understanding and enjoyment of what is afoot on the stage and in real life.

Theater has historically played an important function in the development of the language of clothing as rhetoric. As costume, clothing takes on additional meanings on stage. This involves not only how directors promote their social messages, but also how realizations are accomplished by the reader/viewer. Theater affords us the opportunity to examine how these sets of codes operate and how certain messages are conveyed. Using a set of very simple costumes from *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, my intent is to broaden and demystify one small part of the science of semiology.

Theatrical people have long recognized the significance of costume. To design a costume is to engage the traditions of clothing in the work of the theater. The costume is carefully selected to be the visible sign and symbol of its wearer. At a glance the viewer/reader can tell the current environment, the relationships between the various characters, the character's perception of self, as well as the social and economical climate and historical period.

It has been said that clothing does not make the man, but it does much to explain him. By use of drape, fit, fabric, and color a costume is designed to quickly reveal the various performers. The silent communication of the garb sets the mood... thus saving pages of dialogue. What covers the body reveals the character (Kefgen 12).

The elusiveness of semiotic studies of this type continues to be "where does meaning take place?" The costume stands before us. Each viewer will have some idea of what it means. Collectively as a group the meanings will be somewhat the same. The woman in the slip is not believed to be a harlot. Why? The lines of the costume, the fabric itself, the accessories, the hairstyle,
the age of the wearer will each contribute clues. The context is examined—the
time of day, the place, the atmosphere, the mood, the apparel of the other
actors, the reaction of the other actors. All will factor into the decision.

At what point can clothing as communication be differentiated from clothing
as body covering? How does it make meaning? Is the meaning in the sender
or the receiver? Or does meaning lie somewhere in-between? Structuralism
and semiotics present the world with a different way to look at just such
questions. Instead of being “word centered,” language is relational or
structurally centered (Hawkes 22). “Signification is thus nothing but such
transposition from one level of language to another, from one language to a
different language, and meaning is nothing but the possibility of such
transcoding” (Hawkes 121).

Ruth Amossy’s “Toward a Rhetoric of the Stage: The Scenic Realization of
Verbal Cliches” is an effort to show the “nature of the interaction between the
image and the text” (49). She believes that:

... meaning takes place, not only on the level of each separate
system, but also and essentially at their intersection ... in
one of its main aspects, the corporal. The image in the theater is
above all the physical presence: the moving bodies of the actors,
the various objects manipulated on the stage, the costumes. (49)

For the written play to be actualized, it must be performed. Soma (body or,
in this case, body in costume) translates the written play into the visual.
Costume provides a visual level equated to the linguistic one and thus
reinforces the gestus. But costume can also create a “scenic plane opposed to
the verbal one, or apparently disconnected from what is supposed to be its
linguistic model” (Amossy 62). For example, when Maggie takes off her dress
and stands in a slip—a shocking visualization to the audience—the verbal banter
between Maggie and Brick is strangely disconnected from what is visualized.
The dialogue covers a range: a mixture of everyday chatter, snide remarks, talk of sibling's fertility, their own childlessness, death, motherhood, sex and disgust of sex, back to hostility and divorce, back to Maggie's reminiscence of their love, and finally to Maggie's attempts to seduce Brick. This all takes place in the space of a few minutes. The effect is almost like a shock treatment. The audience is exposed to the whole cycle of life—birth, death, renewal, the institution of marriage and family, woman's position in society, a hint of homosexuality, even a brief mention of religion—all while viewing a young woman parading around almost nude. It is almost too much to absorb. The audience must now re-examining their personal values on the issues that touch their lives. Thus, the intersection of the visual and the verbal, or the relationship of the interaction between the visual and the verbal, in this case, produces thought-provoking meaning. The physical slip (body) is an intrusion into a pre-established order of logic. The audience, shocked into thinking, must suspend judgment until they are able to assimilate the meanings.

The stage is a safe environment where issues such as sexuality can be examined by a community. The slip's shock value lies in its syntagmatic relationship with all other garments. Since it is "underwear," it is not viewed by strangers and is normally worn next to the skin. It has now become associated with the idea that it is a sensual garment. "The mutual interference of text and body may provoke a destruction of artificial values (expressed in fixed linguistic structures) by the outburst of the libido (scenic corporal expression)" (Amossy 62).

Since it is difficult or almost impossible to participate in society without language, an understanding of how language functions is imperative. Not only will understanding semiotics lead to a fuller knowledge of self and the mental
processes we all engage in, it will also lead to better communication with others. All languages continually change. This is an accepted fact. People have tried to dictate laws about language in the past; dictionaries were a direct result of such attempts. To prescribe is impossible. Semiotics of clothing is and must be a descriptive history. "The writer stands in the present, unable to control what has been inherited from the past or how (what) he/she produces will be consumed in the future" (Barthes, "Elements of Semiology" 36-37).

The ability to read the unwritten languages is to fill in the gaps in the multi layers of meanings and will be the difference between a successful writer, speaker, actor, director, reader, viewer, and one who is not successful. This ability will give us the detachment needed to see how others behave, so that we may each construct our own social vision. The language of clothing, similar to any language, fulfills a powerful human need—the need to communicate persuasively. The reader/viewer response to the rhetoric of costume is but one level in understanding the complicated process of language.
Works Cited


