Have You Taken Your Lobster for a Walk Today?
The Importance of Dress in the Bohemian Literary Movement in Nineteenth Century France

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Abstract
This paper explores through writing of Baudelaire, Nerval, Gautier, Champfleury and Murger the ways in which Bohemians used dress to identify themselves and differentiate themselves from the prominent bourgeoisie.

Keywords
Bohemians, literature, France, nineteenth century

Disciplines
Creative Writing | Fashion Business | Fashion Design

Comments
Have you taken your lobster for a walk lately? The importance of dress in the Bohemian literary movement in nineteenth century France

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The purpose of this study is to investigate the Bohemian literary movement of the early nineteenth century in France. It is an attempt to connect the way the Bohemians dressed with their lifestyle and the cultural and historical phenomena surrounding it. This project begins with an attempt at defining the subject, the Bohemians. It defines them in contrast to their opposites, the Bourgeois. The study also provides background information on the historical events in French history that contributed to the creation of Bohemian society. Both primary and secondary sources are analyzed to draw connections between the Bohemian literature and lifestyle and their way of dressing. This study will also suggest influences on the dress and lifestyles of more modern groups. The study is framed by the fiction of Bohemian authors as well as secondary non-fiction literature about the Bohemians.

Who exactly were the Bohemians? Defining the major contributors in the Bohemian literary movement can be somewhat challenging. If one were to write a manual entitled, “How to Become a Bohemian in 5 Easy Steps,” the “rules” of existence may look something like this:

1. Reject prevailing bourgeois ideals of conservatism and consumerism.
2. Adopt exaggerated dress.
3. Live in poverty with the art of creation as your sustenance.
4. Commune with others with a similar philosophy.
5. Write something occasionally that could be published.

After studying many Bohemian texts, these are basic stipulations this author has concluded necessary for living in the great and desolate realm of Bohemia. These “rules,” though not all-encompassing of the Bohemian lifestyle are commonalities shared by many prominent Bohemians this paper investigates.

In the first half of the nineteenth century, “society was reconstructed around individuals, not intermediate groups,” (Seigel, 1996, p. 9). The Bourgeois and the Bohemian were two sides of the same story. They appeared in society at the same time in response to the same historic events: the French and the Industrial Revolution. While neither social group is easily defined, their responses to these monumental historic events and to each other bore both similarities and drastic differences. The Seigel text (1996) summarizes the dichotomous relationship by stating, “Like positive and negative magnetic poles, Bohemian and bourgeois were—and are—parts of a single field: they imply, require, and attract each other (p. 9). Seigel further states, “Bohemia grew up where the borders of bourgeois existence were murky and uncertain. It was a space within which newly liberated energies were continually thrown up against the barriers being erected to contain them, where social margins and frontiers were probed and tested (p.10-11).
The Bohemians, in challenging the newly formed bourgeois way of life, were creating their own terms of existence.

The boundaries of Bohemia are hazy. Though the Bohemians lived primarily in Paris in the early part of the nineteenth century, what truly defines a person as a Bohemian is debatable. Many of the Bohemians were artists of some sort. The writers were the ones who saw the most success, among them Charles Baudelaire, Gérard de Nerval, and Théophile Gautier. Henri Murger is perhaps the most noteworthy, however. It was his 1845 publication, *Scènes de la vie de Bohème,* (The Bohemians of the Latin Quarter), that inspired the Puccini Opera *La Bohème,* and, more recently, the popular Broadway musical *RENT.* The most fervent Bohemians lived as though life itself were the greatest artwork of all, with every action and decision made to contribute to an overall masterpiece. They were deeply romantic, in the literary sense of the word, fueling their art with emotion and inspiration, often forgoing the actual sustenance food would provide. Bohemians did all this in spite of their bourgeois contemporaries, who were driven by money and what they deemed a just living. One source states:

> Bohemia, …consists of the great family of poor artists, whose destiny is to be unknown, because they do not know or cannot find the means to attest their existence in art… They are the race of stubborn dreamers, for whom art remains a faith and not a trade… If you point out to them, gently, that this is the nineteenth century, that a hundred-sou piece is Empress of humanity, and that boots don’t fall ready polished from heaven, they turn their backs on you and call you bourgeois,” (Richardson, 1998, p. 107).

Where the bourgeois used money to buy happiness, the Bohemians found their reason for life in art and in companionship. They scoffed the bourgeois in what they considered a lifeless existence. To the Bohemians, the bourgeois had sacrificed personal expression. The Bohemians embraced their newfound liberty in pursuing an artful, if haggard and penniless existence, while the bourgeois found safety in the newly formed social norms of earning and spending.

One way the Bohemians expressed their desire to be different from the bourgeois and live an artistic life was through dress. To be taken seriously as a Bohemian, it was absolutely essential to dress like one. The adoption of the signature erratic dress was requisite among this cultural set. Using the bourgeois as a comparison, the Bohemians were decidedly different in their manner of dress. While a bourgeois would keep his choice of dress within the acceptable limits of the current style, the Bohemian would necessarily go beyond these limits. If a bourgeois was as the Payne text describes, “Men were so anxious for a full-chested line that they wore double breasted vests and cinched their waists with corsets for contrast,” (p. 474) then his Bohemian counterpart would be likely to pad and cinch even more, excessively so.

This paper explores through the writing of Baudelaire, Nerval, Gautier, Champfleury and Murger the ways in which Bohemians used dress to identify themselves and differentiate themselves from the prominent bourgeoisie. Although the Bohemians themselves abandoned
their artistic lifestyle, their legacy would influence future artists, writers, and designers. The impact of the Bohemians can still be seen today—more recent groups, such as the Punks and Surrealists, have reinterpreted their ambitions and philosophies in the creation of life as art.

References

