

Does the “clothing” dress the character, or does the character wear the *clothing*?

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Abstract: *This article proposes an interpretive framework through which reality is perceived not as it objectively is, but as it is filtered through the self. Regardless of the “cloak” one wears, each individual adopts a symbolic layer through which identity is both constructed and recognized. The study examines the dynamic relationship between character and costume, arguing that clothing is not merely an external addition but an active participant in the formation of identity. Drawing on Ion Cojar, the character is understood as a living, dynamic totality—bio-psycho-social and cultural requiring embodiment, expression, and complexity”².*

Keywords: *Clothing; character; costume; identity; performance; appearance;*

Introduction

Based on the definition given for VEȘMÎNT, veșminte, n. (Any item of clothing; (pl.) the totality of items that make up a person’s attire³), I aim to present a scientific approach and artistic research: “the garment” as a piece of clothing and “the garment” as a typological reference. The actor uses the following means of expression voice, dance, and pantomime in his search for forms of expression in interactions with the other characters, so that the artistic performance may take place. This aspect is primarily utilized and gains a broader perspective through the external elements employed and placed in the background: set design, stage design, props, and costumes. “From an aesthetic standpoint, this approach is supported by the set design, costumes, and props on stage... For him, just as for Meyerhold, there should be nothing on stage that does not directly contribute to the performance and, above all, does not support the actors’ performance”⁴.

1. Clothing and character

Both the means of expression and the external elements that come together to form the entire stage picture known as a theatrical performance as well as the purpose and approach employed jointly by the director and set designer, demonstrate the fusion of these arts. Costume functions simultaneously as an external signifier and an active agent in character construction. On the one hand, clothing situates the character within a specific historical, social, and stylistic context. On the other hand, the character inhabits and activates the costume, revealing personality, status, and psychological depth through performance. “Each of us is less than we could be. The

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² Ion Cojar. 2025. *O poetică a artei actorului*, Ediția a -V-a [*A Poetics of the Art of Acting*, 5th Edition]. București: Editura UNATC PRESS, p. 141.

³ Retrieved April 10, 2026, from <https://dexonline.ro/definitie/ve%C8%99m%C3%AEnt/941593>.

⁴ Peter M. Boenisch și Thomas Ostermeier. 2024. *Teatrul lui Thomas Ostermeier* [*Thomas Ostermeier's Theater*]. București: Editura Nemira, p. 60.

being that comes into its own stifles, within everyone, several other beings that might have come into their own. Artistic creation brings these out of the vague realm of the public, giving them the illusion of a concrete existence; especially in the case of dramatic and epic creation, the artist realizes himself through multiple possibilities”⁵. The primary function of a costume is to reflect the character’s status and social role within the structure of the performance. At the same time, it is also what describes or portrays the character’s type and personality. “First and foremost, the purpose of drama is ‘to hold up a mirror to human nature’ and ‘to show virtue in its true light, and pride in its true form’...”⁶. Next, I’ll elaborate on the stylistic elements that define the costume, based on what the stylist and costume designer present: “The costume or rather, the very essence of each era, as it has portrayed itself, recreating itself through clothing a second skin in harmony with the setting of its life a third layer. Through these protective yet expressive layers, visual communication with others takes place, sometimes even more direct and compelling than through words”⁷.

The actor embodies characters both in terms of their inner psychological life and their outer physical life, drawing here on Jung’s interpretation of the psychological functions he termed: “*Sensation* (that is, perception through the senses) tells you that something exists; *thought* tells you what it is; *feeling* tells you whether it is pleasant or not; and *intuition* tells you where it comes from and where it is going (Man and His Symbols, 61)”⁸. This paper aims to show that we see things not as they are, but as we are. Regardless of the “cloak” we wear, each of us wears a cloak through which and by which we authenticate and identify ourselves in the persona we bring into the spotlight. In this context, Ion Cojar argues that: “The character demands life, human complexity, dynamism, and contradiction; it claims to exist as an intelligent and sentient human being; it demands a body; it demands verbal expression; in short, it demands to be a living ‘totality,’ a ‘complexly organized unity’ bio-psycho-socio-cultural.”⁹ To add to what I have said above, I would like to note that, from the perspective of stylistic art, “Clothing has always reflected people’s relative standing on the social ladder... Shaping the body’s contours through clothing and the head through hairstyling is akin to the art of sculpture; and the use of colors in makeup or clothing to achieve certain effects and evoke emotional responses belongs to the art of painting”¹⁰. There are situations in which the character wears the garment, controlling their image, but also contexts in which the garment “clothes” the character, shaping their identity and social perception.

With every character and role an actor plays, their cultural background grows richer, as each new role and performance brings fresh perspectives and insights insights they begin to uncover even during table readings, where information is shared about the period in which the action takes place, everything related to the economic, political, stylistic, and cultural context, the social context, the playwright’s work, their life, and productions from around the world, both nationally and internationally. All this information and research foster a collaboration or rather, a healthy and clear partnership between the director and the actors. Thus, the situation proposed by the director and actors following prior discussions determines the action and not necessarily the character’s psychological makeup. Once the actor understands the situation and the action they

⁵ Tudor Vianu. 1979. *Estetică [Aesthetics]*. București: Editura pentru Literatură, p. 187.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 49.

⁷ Adina Nanu. 2007. *Artă, stil, costum. Manual avizat de Ministerul Educației și cercetării [Thread, Style, Costume: A Manual Approved by the Ministry of Education and Research]*. București: Editura Noi Media Print, p. 12.

⁸ Antony Stevens. 1996. *Jung*. București: Editura Humanitas, pp. 100–101.

⁹ Ion Cojar. 2025. *O poetică a artei actorului*, Ediția a -V-a [*A Poetics of the Art of Acting*, 5th Edition]. București: Editura UNATC PRESS, p. 141.

¹⁰ Adina Nanu, *op. cit.*, pp. 14–18.

must perform and resolve, rehearsals proceed smoothly. “The actor can, therefore, build their character, literally, from head to toe (which is why I find it essential to rehearse in the shoes you’ll wear on stage, because the experience of how you connect with the stage floor is a fundamental foundation for the performance). I would even go so far as to say that an actor shouldn’t play a character at all, but should, first and foremost, play a process”¹¹. Thus, costume cannot be reduced to mere decoration; it operates as a semiotic system, echoing Roland Barthes’ assertion that fashion constitutes a language of signs: „garment is always sign”¹². It communicates social identity, often prior to verbal expression, shaping both perception and interaction. In literature and in everyday life, the relationship between people and clothing raises a subtle question: who defines whom? Is clothing merely an object worn by a character, or does it become an element that shapes their identity? Far from being a mere external detail, clothing often takes on a symbolic function, influencing how the character is perceived and even how they perceive themselves. On the one hand, it can be argued that the character is the one who wears the clothes, and that clothing is nothing more than a personal choice or a practical necessity. In this sense, the garment remains a secondary element, subordinate to the individual’s will. The character exists independently of appearances, and their identity is constructed through thoughts, actions, and values. Such a perspective emphasizes authenticity and suggests that human essence cannot be reduced to image. On the other hand, literature offers numerous examples in which clothing transcends its status as an object and becomes a symbol of identity. Clothing not only reflects a character’s social status but also comes to define their very existence. From a broader perspective, clothing can be viewed as a symbolic language. It conveys information about status, personality, or cultural identity, sometimes even before the person utters a word. In this way, clothing *speaks* on the individual’s behalf, helping to construct an image that can influence social relationships and how the person is perceived. The relationship between character and costume is inherently reciprocal. At times, the individual exercises control over appearance; at others, appearance shapes identity and social perception. Rather than a hierarchical dynamic, this interaction constitutes a continuous negotiation between inner reality and external representation. The question of whether clothing dresses the person or whether the person wears the clothing ultimately conceals a deeper issue: to what extent is our identity authentic, and to what extent is it constructed through visible forms whether chosen or imposed? From a psychological perspective, clothing may be interpreted as an extension of the self. In psychoanalytic terms, as suggested by Sigmund Freud, external appearances can function as symbolic expressions of internal processes. Choices of attire are therefore not entirely conscious, but may encode desires, anxieties, or defense mechanisms. Sigmund Freud emphasized that outward manifestations are symbolic expressions of inner contents¹³. Thus, clothing becomes an indirect language of desires, anxieties, or defense mechanisms. Wearing a particular garment is not merely a conscious act, but one laden with unconscious meanings. Similarly, Carl Gustav Jung’s concept of the persona frames clothing as a visible manifestation of the social mask an adaptive interface between the individual and societal expectations¹⁴. In this context, clothing becomes a visible manifestation of this mask. Not only does it protect us, but it also adapts us to the expectations of others. The character is no longer just himself, but a negotiated version of his self, shaped by social norms. At the same time, Mark Twain’s statement “Clothes make the man” takes on a profound psychological dimension: not only

¹¹ Peter M. Boenisch și Thomas Ostermeier. 2024. *Teatrul lui Thomas Ostermeier [Thomas Ostermeier's Theater]*. București: Editura Nemira, p. 235.

¹² Roland Barthes. 1983. *The Fashion System*. New York: Hill and Wang, p. 3.

¹³ Sigmund Freud. 1927. *The Ego and the Id*. London: Hogarth Press, p. 25.

¹⁴ Carl Gustav Jung. 1966. *Two Essays on Analytical Psychology*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, p. 24.

do others perceive us differently based on our appearance, but we ourselves relate to ourselves differently. Thus, clothing not only expresses identity but actively shapes it. Character does not manifest itself in its pure form, but is mediated by the forms through which it is expressed. Clothes don't make the man, but they do influence, highlight, or distort his character. Thus, a person is neither merely what they are nor merely what they appear to be, but rather the result of a dynamic relationship between essence and appearance. A character does not exist apart from their appearance, and clothing is never completely separate from the person wearing it. A continuous dialogue unfolds between them. Perhaps it is not the clothing that clothes the character, nor is it simply the character who wears the clothing rather, the two construct each other in a subtle interplay of appearances and meanings. The sociologist Erving Goffman describes social life as a stage, where each individual plays a role¹⁵. In this context, clothing is not merely a detail, but an essential element of the “costume” that lends credibility to the social character. Thus, character does not manifest itself in its pure form, but is mediated by the forms through which it is expressed.

2. Conclusions

In conclusion, the relationship between the individual and clothing resists reductive interpretation. Costume operates both as expression and as construction, reflecting identity while simultaneously shaping it. From a psychological standpoint, it mediates between the unconscious and the social sphere, bridging who we are and what we reveal. Ultimately, it is not simply that the character wears the costume, nor that the costume defines the character; rather, the two emerge through a subtle and ongoing process of mutual formation.

3. References

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¹⁵ Erving Goffman. 1959. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. New York: Anchor Books, p. 22.