

CHAPTER 4

SMEARED MAKEUP AND STILETTO HEELS

Clothing, Sexuality, and the Walk of Shame



7 a.m.: These Boots Aren't Made for Walking

When I mentioned to my students that I was writing an essay on the walk of shame, some responded with knowing looks and smirks while others responded with a bit of confusion. Others in the class responded to their confused classmates by explaining that the walk of shame is when men and women make the trek back to their apart-

ments or dorm rooms after a night spent elsewhere. "All you have to do is wait outside a frat house or a sorority house on Sunday morning to see the walk of shame," one student explained. Once the explanation had been made, they immediately recognized the phenomenon.

There is a good reason why the walk of shame is not quite so prevalent at my current campus. Ours is mainly a commuter campus with a small percentage of students living near or on campus. However, at Penn State, where I received my doctorate, a large percentage of students lived either on campus or within a few blocks of the university. As such, the walk of shame was an institution. For example, when I taught a course in small group communication, I had an assignment where students had to create an infomercial selling some product of their choosing, either real or imagined. One group developed a "walk of shame kit." In doing so, they

polled 100 women who lived in the dorms with them and asked questions such as “Have you performed the walk of shame?” “If so, how many times?” and “What do you wish you had brought when you performed the walk of shame?” They found that many had performed the walk of shame at least a few times, and one woman confessed to doing so 50 times. I expressed doubt that such a number was accurate, but was corrected when one of the students explained that that response had come from her roommate. “It’s definitely accurate; she’s had an interesting semester,” she explained.

A former colleague at Penn State reported that he would go out to breakfast with his roommates on Sunday morning and watch as people performed the walk of shame; for them, it was like breakfast and a show. People performing the walk of shame are easy to identify – they are wearing clothing that is calculated to attract sexual attention that seems out of place in an early morning walk. As such, women are much easier to identify. As Laura Baron notes, “Everyone knows black-patent leather stilettos, jeans, and sequins isn’t a morning jogging outfit.”¹ This essay will focus mainly on women who perform the walk of shame because they are particularly held up for ridicule because of their transparency. My students reported that people in the dorms would mock the women who performed the walk of shame, calling them “whores” and “sluts.” Elsewhere, I have discussed the rhetorical and semantic aspects of defining this behavior as the walk of shame.² In this essay, I take a semiotic approach. Semiotics is the study of signs and sign systems, which makes it particularly well-suited to examining aspects of the walk of shame, such as the clothing, that mark such behavior as shameful. Specifically, I will consider how the clothing worn during the walk of shame functions as an index (i.e., a specific type of sign) of sexuality, which is marked, especially in young women, as shameful.

Dressing for (Sexual) Success

Dress is the first indicator that a woman is performing the walk of shame. When I was an undergraduate, I had a housemate who would often go to the Peacock tavern to the “Top of the Cock” where there was dancing on frat night. She would come to my room if she wanted an honest opinion on her outfit for the night. On one such occasion, she asked my opinion and the exchange went something like this:



"How do I look?"

"You look like a slut."

"OK, but how about the specifics?"

"The shirt is good – it shows off the cleavage well."

"OK, good. How about the pants?"

"Turn around. They make your ass look big."

"So lose the pants?"

"Lose the pants, but the top is good."

In this exchange, she was not terribly concerned about the appearance of looking like a slut, so much as she was concerned about looking like an *attractive* slut.

The clothes that a woman wears during the walk of shame fall into a particular category; they are generally more revealing, accentuating her body in such a way as to invite desire. The shoes are not the sensible shoes of the workplace, but rather the "hooker shoes" or "fuck-me pumps" of the club scene. Even the fabric itself is more sensual, clinging to her body in some places, and flowing and gauzy in others. The colors are likewise selected to denote sexiness; this is not the place for bright flowery prints or whimsical patterns. Instead, she chooses dark, serious colors that evoke the mystery of the *femme fatale* or bold colors that draw the viewer's eye to what lies beneath the clothing, rather than the clothing itself. As a society, we are in general agreement concerning what certain articles of clothing are trying to communicate. Let us now examine the typical outfit for a night at the club or the bar to see what is being communicated and, more importantly, *how* it is being communicated.

Philosopher Charles Peirce described two types of signs that are relevant for our discussion of the walk of shame: indexes and symbols. Peirce explains that an index is "a sign which refers to the Object that it denotes by virtue of really being affected by that Object."³ The typical analogue of an indexical sign is a thermometer; as the temperature rises, the mercury rises. A symbol, on the other hand, refers to an object because we have agreed that the symbol refers to the object.⁴ For example, a flag may represent a nation, but it has no resemblance to the nation; the association is essentially arbitrary and held only by mutual agreement.

Generally, the woman's clothing reveals much more flesh than everyday clothing. I suggest that such clothing functions as an index of sexuality because the more flesh that is revealed, especially flesh that is considered taboo to reveal, such as the breasts and buttocks, the more sexual the outfit is considered to be. It is not uncommon to see women

wearing low-cut or backless shirts, short skirts, or tight-fitting pants that hug the hips. When the woman performs the walk of shame in such an outfit, she demonstrates a potential for sexual behavior by displaying herself in a manner deemed to be sexual.

Yet it is not simply the display of skin that codes an article of clothing as sexual, but rather what particular area of skin is displayed. In jeans, the woman may wear a pair of low-rise pants that bare the midriff and ride just below the pelvic bone, drawing attention to the pubic area that lies just beneath the waistline. The skirt, however, functions to draw the eye upward from the lower hem to the pubic area or buttocks that are hidden (in the walk of shame, often barely hidden) just above.

The underwear (or potential lack thereof) likewise functions as an index of sexuality. The halter top or backless shirt may call attention to the lack of bra, which allows the breasts to move freely, also calling attention to her body and potentially highlighting her nipples. The woman's underwear may ride up displaying the "whale tail" of the thong or g-string that she wears beneath the pants or skirt, likewise calling attention to what lies beneath. Such clothing may also help to reinforce the idea that the woman is sexy not only in the minds of the observers, but herself as well. Such underwear is meant to transcend practical needs of support and coverage; it is meant to display sexiness. In this way, the undergarments function as another part of the costume that reinforces the image that the woman seeks to display, but, unlike the rest of her costume, a part that will be seen fully only by the person with whom she will go home. Other more visible undergarments such as stockings, pantyhose, or leggings compress the leg to make it appear leaner and alter the color of the skin, or, in the case of colored tights or fishnet, draw attention to the leg. Stockings or hose also conceal blemishes, body hair, or other imperfections of the leg, providing the illusion of perfect smoothness.

Some articles of clothing may seem to function more as symbols than as indexes, such as high heels. High heels are worn not only at the club, but also in the workplace, and as such could be coded as professional wear, but despite their presence in the workplace, high heels are coded as quintessentially feminine and as sexy. Moreover, the heels that the women may wear during the walk of shame (or simply carry, thus reinforcing their discomfort) are not the heels of the workplace, but rather the stiletto heels of the club that are associated with sexiness. Yet, I suggest that these heels serve not only as a symbol, but also as an *index* in that they actually reshape the body to more fully conform to societal norms of attractiveness by elongating the leg and creating the illusion of



leaner, sexier legs. Moreover, such shoes cause the wearer to walk in such a way that hip motion is accentuated, thus drawing attention to the pelvic area. Once again, this sign may be directed not only outwardly, but also toward herself.

Some ornaments do seem to function as symbols, such as jewelry, makeup, or sequined tops. These objects signify that the outfit is constructed for a different time and place than the everyday. Perhaps this is why the outfit seems so jarring to witness in the morning. For example, where modest earrings are common in the workplace, the woman may choose to wear large, dangling earrings that move with her body and accentuate her face. She is less likely to choose the demure strand of pearls and more likely to choose the necklace with the pendant that hangs between her breasts, drawing the eye to her cleavage. Likewise, she coifs her hair for work, but when seeking sexual conquest, her hairstyle is crafted to portray a sense of glamour or beauty in ways that may not be present in her morning grooming ritual.

In order to understand how these elements function with the complete outfit, we must consider the outfit as a syntagm. In semiotics, systems constitute a class of like kinds of individual elements, such as different types of skirts. Elements of a system cannot be used together – in other words, one generally wears a long skirt or a short skirt, but not both.⁵ Combining different elements of systems forms the syntagm, and each element of the syntagm contributes to the meaning of the whole. For example, Barthes notes:

The language, in the garment system, is made (i) by the opposition of pieces, parts of garment and “details,” the variation of which entails a change of meaning (to wear a beret or a bowler hat does not have the same meaning); (ii) by the rules which govern the association of the pieces among themselves, either on the length of the body or on the depth.⁶

For example, a woman can choose to wear a flowing skirt or a micro-mini skirt and this decision affects the system that includes pants, shorts, skirts, and dresses. But one cannot look at individual choices of a system, such as skirts, in isolation, even though these elements alter the meanings we ascribe to the outfit. One must look at what the entire ensemble – the syntagm – signifies, because a long, flowing skirt paired with a skin-tight, sheer top and no bra would still signify sexuality. In the case of the woman who performs the walk of shame, the syntagm almost always signifies sex.



Shamefulness and the Walk of Shame

In the morning, the observer notes that a woman who dressed in a way to attract sexual attention spent the night at someone else's home and the chain of reasoning begins. It is important to note that the accuracy of the judgment is not the issue. Witnesses are only able to draw from what they observe, as well as their personal experiences. The unspoken idea here that becomes obvious to the observer (despite what actually occurred) is that the woman is coming from a sexual encounter with someone she is now leaving. Many fragments of experience go into this judgment. First is the assumption that sexual people do not spend the night at someone's house without having sex with someone; certainly, such an outfit is not something that one wears when spending the night with a friend. Second is the assumption that the sex that was had was a random hook up rather than sex in a committed relationship. After all, why would the woman slink out of the house shortly after dawn if she and her partner had a relationship? This line of reasoning is likewise accepted by the woman performing the walk of shame. Sarah Morrison, writing in *Cosmopolitan*, states, "What makes those slinks back to safety so totally unbearable is that most of the time, all we're dressed in is our skimpiest manhunt ensembles and last night's makeup. Hell, we might as well be wearing a sign that says 'I just came from a sexy sleepover.'"⁷

Thus, the walk of shame is not only a function of the clothing that the woman wears, but also the time and space she occupies. Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann suggest that "the canons of proper dress for different social occasions ... are taken for granted in everyday life."⁸ There is a time and place to look sexy. For example, *Chicago Tribune* columnist Gina B. described the disheveled state of her college suitemate, "Miss Bedhead," who "crept in at 6:30 a.m. looking like she'd been run over by a truck," wearing revealing clothing, smeared lipstick, and tousled hair.⁹ Yet for the author of this narrative, Miss Bedhead's transgression was not the sex itself but rather the sin of impropriety. In response to Miss Bedhead's statement, "I can't believe I hooked up with him!!" the author recounted that "I had no problem with the hook up – I couldn't believe she actually walked around on campus looking like that."¹⁰ However, I would suggest that the author is much more forgiving than others who may have viewed this spectacle, because such behavior transgresses social norms of femininity. Shannon Gilmartin notes that "'Hook ups,' or casual sexual interactions that are familiar to



many undergraduates today, leave some women feeling awkward and disappointed, feelings no doubt engendered by the 'proper' code of feminine conduct (women are not supposed to act on their desire, especially outside of a romantic relationship)."¹¹

Because the clothing functions as an index of sexuality in a time and place where the woman is forbidden to display such desire, the act is coded as shameful. Yet this is not merely a function of the woman herself; the viewer may also be complicit in the act. Kenneth Burke suggests that those who hold up scapegoats as objects of ridicule often conceal their own tendencies toward the act in question: "When the attacker chooses for himself the object of attack, it is usually his blood brother; the debunker is much closer to the debunked than others are."¹² These women become scapegoats for the viewer's own potential desires and failings. After all, we must disabuse ourselves of the notion that college is where young adults begin experimenting with sex; public health researchers estimate that almost half of the adolescent population has engaged in sexual intercourse.¹³ By the time they reach college, about half of the observers who mock the woman engaging in the walk of shame are no longer virgins themselves, and even those who are technically virgins may have engaged in some form of sexual behavior. This, more than anything, explains why the walk of shame is considered shameful – in order to maintain one's own supposed innocence, those who observe *must* cast derision on those who display their sexuality openly. That women are allowed to wear clothing that openly signifies sexuality in the evening, yet not in the morning light, reinforces the idea that they can seek sex, and can portray themselves as sexual beings, but they are not actually allowed to act on those desires or to *succeed* in their efforts. A woman can be desirable but cannot consummate that desire.

With such sanctions leveled on women who perform the walk of shame, one is left to ask, "Why do they do it?" The simplest answer is because women are sexual creatures who, like the men with whom they have sex, sometimes act on their desires. But it is also illustrative to consider what Susan Bordo describes as the "receptive pleasures traditionally reserved for women," such as "the pleasures, not of staring someone down but of feeling one's body caressed by another's eyes.... Some people describe these receptive pleasures as 'passive'.... 'Passive' hardly describes what's going on when one person offers himself or herself to another. Inviting, receiving, responding – these are active behaviors too, and rather thrilling ones."¹⁴ Women have been socialized to be attractive and desirable, and it is acceptable and enjoyable to be observed as an object of sexual beauty,



to be seen as desirable. Yet women must negotiate a paradoxical imperative to be sexy but not sexual, desirable but not desiring. Once a woman appears to have acted on her sexual desire, she is persecuted and shamed by her peers.

There is, of course, nothing intrinsically shameful about the walk of shame. Alan Soble argues that “the sexual permeates our Being. But this does not make sexual ethics *sui generis*, even if this ethics is important. Nor need it be restrictive; if our being is sexual, that could be just as much reason for a relaxed, as for a restrictive, sexual ethics.”¹⁵ Sexuality is a natural part of life, but the walk of shame is not merely about sex. One does not perform the walk of shame when one returns from the home of a lover; rather, the walk of shame takes place when there is a tinge of regret. This shamefulness is inscribed on the body itself.

In the evening before the walk of shame, the woman moves in such a way as to draw attention to herself. She moves in close to the target of her affection, whispering in his (or her – there is always the assumption that it is him, however) ear, a subtle touch on the arm, a brush against the thigh, a quick toss of the hair, a laugh. All of these behaviors stand in stark contrast against the next morning, where she hurriedly gathers her belongings, attempting not to wake the object of the previous evening’s affections. She attempts to return home as inconspicuously as possible, yet she is thwarted in this effort because her clothing still loudly proclaims her sexuality by drawing attention to her flesh. Much as when someone lowers his voice and others strain to hear what is so interesting, she draws attention to herself by attempting to avoid attention.

Her movements in the evening reinforce her sexuality, even as her movements in the morning attempt to deny it. The walk of shame itself would not be shameful without the observation of others. Gilles Deleuze observes, “A body affects other bodies, or is affected by other bodies.”¹⁶ This works both ways in the case of the walk of shame. The woman’s body is a body out of place, which causes a jarring effect on those who recognize her for what she performs (not necessarily what she is). They see her as a breach of feminine codes of conduct, and as such, other women are implicated in her transgression. Other bodies gaze at her, disciplining her through knowing looks and slurs muttered in her direction. Her clothing and her own adoption of a shameful affect testify against her. At this point, her clothing acts as an index of *actualized* sexuality, while her recoiling away from the weight of observation functions as a signal of her shame.



You Can Walk, But You Can't Hide (The Shame)

What seems, more than anything, to make the walk of shame shameful is its transparency. The walk of shame is a manifestation of feminine sexuality which is simultaneously required and forbidden. Such paradoxical norms are shaped early in our development and women are as likely as men to sanction other women. Yet the reason we know that such an act is worthy of shame is the semiotic codes displayed by the woman as she performs the walk of shame. Such codes take considerable effort to alter. Naomi Wolf observes that attitudes toward clothing are indicative of women's position in society:

Clothing that highlights women's sexuality will be casual wear when women's sexuality is under our own control. When female sexuality is fully affirmed as a legitimate passion that arises from within, to be directed without stigma to the chosen object of our desire, the sexually expressive clothes or manner we may assume can no longer be used to shame us, blame us, or target us for beauty myth harassment.¹⁷

Still, so long as a double standard concerning sexuality remains, college women all over the country will attempt to look sexy on Saturday nights, they will engage in sexual behavior, they will attempt to slink home unobserved, and the walk of shame will continue to be shameful.

NOTES

- 1 Laura Baron, "Sex on the First Date? Be Respectful: Talk About It," *Chicago Tribune*, September 9, 2004.
- 2 See Brett Lunceford, "The Walk of Shame: A Normative Description," *ETC: A Review of General Semantics* 65, 4 (2008): 319–29. Despite its ubiquity, little scholarly attention has been paid to the walk of shame. The only other article I could find that discusses the walk of shame at all was Elizabeth L. Paul, "Beer Goggles, Catching Feelings, and the Walk of Shame: The Myths and Realities of the Hookup Experience," in D. Charles Kirkpatrick, Steve Duck, and Megan K. Foley (eds.) *Relating Difficulty: The Processes of Constructing and Managing Difficult Interaction* (Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2006), pp. 141–60. Even so, the main focus of Paul's essay was not on the walk of shame, but rather on how college students described "hook-ups" or sex with random people; the walk of shame was a peripheral aspect.



- 3 Charles S. Peirce, *Collected Papers*, 6 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1960), vol. 2, p. 248.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 249.
- 5 For a concise explanation of the differences between system and syntagm, see Roland Barthes, *Elements of Semiology*, trans. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (New York: Hill and Wang, 1968), p. 63.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 27.
- 7 Sarah Morrison, "When I Did the Walk of Shame," *Cosmopolitan* (February 2002), p. 128.
- 8 Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (New York: Anchor Books, 1966), p. 148.
- 9 Gina B., "Turn Walk of Shame into Walk of Pride," *Chicago Tribune*, December 2, 2005.
- 10 *Ibid.*
- 11 Shannon K. Gilmartin, "Changes in College Women's Attitudes toward Sexual Intimacy," *Journal of Research on Adolescence* 16, 3 (2006): 429–30. Here, Gilmartin quotes the following: E. L. Paul and K. A. Hayes, "The Casualties of Casual Sex: A Qualitative Exploration of the Phenomenology of College Students' Hookups," *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* 19 (2002): 639–61; Norval Glenn and Elizabeth Marquardt, *Hooking Up, Hanging Out, and Hoping for Mr. Right: College Women on Mating and Dating Today* (New York: Institute for American Values, 2001).
- 12 Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1945), pp. 406–7.
- 13 John Santelli et al., "Trends in Sexual Risk Behaviors, by Nonsexual Risk Behavior Involvement, US High School Students, 1991–2007," *Journal of Adolescent Health* 44, 4 (2009): 372–9.
- 14 Susan Bordo, *The Male Body: A New Look at Men in Public and in Private* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999), p. 190.
- 15 Alan Soble, "Sexuality and Sexual Ethics," in Lawrence C. Becker and Charlotte B. Becker (eds.) *Encyclopedia of Ethics* (New York: Garland, 1992), p. 1146.
- 16 Gilles Deleuze, "Ethology: Spinoza and Us," in Mariam Fraser and Monica Greco (eds.) *The Body: A Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2005), p. 58.
- 17 Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used against Women* (New York: W. Morrow, 1991), p. 273.

