Psychoanalytic theory, as derived from the works of Sigmund Freud, has been largely discredited as overly reliant on the repressed sexual instinct as the basis for every aspect of daily life (Zaretsky, 1994). In its zeal, psychoanalytic theory submits that elements of material culture are not only what they appear to be, but are also sexual symbols that communicates essential gender characteristics (Harms, 1938). In effect, psychoanalytic theorists act as semioticians, interpreting meaning from patterned cultural sign systems that convey latent messages (Danesi, 2007). According to semiotic theory, clothing is one such non-verbal sign system (Danesi, 2007). Eco (1979) proposed that literally everything, “on the grounds of a previously established social convention, can be taken as something standing for something else” (p. 16), a concept Freud deeply supported, arguing that the “something else” in question was always the unconscious gendered sexual instinct (Harms, 1938). Psychoanalytic theorists argued that clothes “not only serve to arouse sexual interest,” but also “actually symbolize the sexual organs” (Flugel, 1930/1966, p. 26), and Freud was quite explicit: “clothes take the place of the parts of the body” (Rose, 1988, p. 156). With women, he was even more clear, proclaiming that “all women are clothes fetishists,” because, by dressing themselves, they imbued the clothing with the essence of their diffuse libidos, a belief that emphasized his gendered views on the relationship between clothing and sexual instinct (Rose, 1988, p. 156). While these views were contested even at the time, and are generally currently rejected, they offer an intriguing lens through which to evaluate the clothing of Freud’s era.

To that end, this study presents a Freudian analysis of women’s and men’s fashion from the 1870s, the late Victorian period being the time in which Freud was active in constructing his theories. Three images were selected for evaluation: photographs of a British woman’s afternoon dress and a British man’s day suit, in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and “Too Early,” a French painting by James Tissot showing men and women in evening dress (Figures 1, 2, and 3). These garments were chosen as representative of both the fashionable styles of the period and the clothing worn by the middle and upper class people with whom Freud would be most familiar, and therefore for whom his theories were intended.

Figure 1. Afternoon dress, late 1870s, British; silk. Figure 2. Suit, 1865-70, British; wool and silk. Figure 3. “Too Early” by James Tissot, 1873, France.
Indeed, an evaluation of these garments permits a thoroughly Freudian analysis, allowing the identification of gendered sexual symbolism in essentially every aspect, from the shapes of the clothes themselves, to the surface ornamentation, to the very act of dressing, which Freudians believed was akin to the act of sexual intercourse (Harms, 1938; Rose, 1988). For example, the images of women’s skirts provide evidence for the psychoanalytic theories that women wear skirts to fill the empty space between their legs so they can mask the absence of a phallus, allowing them to conceal their penis envy “with great increase of dignity” (Flugel, 1930/1966, p. 35). In addition, women wearing skirts that camouflage their genital area permitted men to subconsciously regard women as phallic, enabling them to sublimate their own fear of castration (Freud, 1927/1961). In fact, psychoanalytic theories detect men’s fear of castration in many sartorial choices. The legs on men’s trousers, for instance, are each a long round tube, a phallus shape that subliminally demonstrates virility (Flugel, 1930/1966). For women, fertility was demonstrated in the hourglass shape of their ensembles, and the pronounced bustle. In actuality, these elements offered fairly clear symbolism, and were so exaggerated as to question the idea of the unconscious. Each drew considerable attention to the fertile shape of a mature woman’s body, and with the bustle, “women were wearing a creditable imitation of a tail” (Flugel, 1930/1966, p. 161). The sexual drive even pervaded design details such as the buttons on the man’s and woman’s ensembles in Figures 1 and 2. In both cases, the buttons are arranged in a straight vertical line “so that they run toward the lap,” constituting “a kind of signboard for a wish that is often quite unconscious to the wearer” (Harms, 1938, p. 243).

This presentation evaluates garments of the 1870s through the lens of Freudianism to illustrate a very particular— and widely questioned— view of the relationship between fashion and gender. While no longer a widely held perspective among scholars, psychoanalytic theory was certainly a product of its time, and in attributing sexual motives to virtually everything, supported the Victorian mandate of genderism, the strict dichotomy of two separate genders as seen in the obvious distinction between the clothing of men and women in the era, a concept, as it happens that is also ascribed to the unconscious sex drive. To Freudians, gendered sexual symbolism is the most predominant motive for the wearing of clothes at all (Flugel, 1930/1966).

References