

Dressing the part

In historical romances, the clothing may not make the man or woman, but it can speak volumes. Questions of fashion involve not only what characters should be wearing in their place and time based on material availability, trends, and social standing, but also how attire dictates ways of moving and modes of communication unavailable without the wardrobe.

At the [Romance Writers of America](#) 2011 national conference, author [Deeanne Gist](#) presented a workshop called “Bottoms Up: Victorian Women’s Clothing from the Inside Out.” Gist addresses questions like “How did you speak with your gloves?” and “Did women wear shorter corsets for meals?”

Dressing like a Victorian lady with Deanne Gist, Romance Writers of American Conference 2011

Deeanne Gist: Ok, now what I want you to notice right here, there are some ties. Do you see these ties on the ribbons? And for those on the tape [referring to filming of the workshop], it’s the ties that go along the back of the crinoline on the interior side, and those rest against your bottom. And what that does is if I just put this on, the crinoline would be doing exactly what it’s doing right now as Heather holds it. It would bow up [toward the front], and it wouldn’t give you that big beautiful bottom, so these rest against your bottom, and it pushes the crinoline up.

Deeane Gist: Alright, I'm going to put this [the microphone] down just for a second, so that—I want you all to see the back. Do you see how it poufs up? Do you see how the bustle is kind of suggested? And this in the back needs to be sitting right on there. [*Gestures to waist.*]

[*Petticoat is lowered over Gist's head.*]

Deeane Gist: Now, I'm going to—. Can you all hear me? You want it—again in the front, you want it flat. So when she [her workshop assistant] gathers it [the petticoat] up, she'll gather it in the back, but the very front will be completely flat.

Deeane Gist: The size of the buttons are different for women than they were men, and, yeah, they go the different direction than the men. And this one covers up the buttons with a piece of lace, so that when she's done buttoning it, you won't be able to see the buttons.

Deeane Gist: And you would mix and match this skirt. This is your foundation garment. You would wear this skirt and the shirtwaist with a belt; you could wear it with a ball gown; you could take the bells off and wear your ball top with this; you could wear it with a jacket with it which is what I'm going to do. Can you see the tucks, the gathers in the back? Isn't that pretty?

Deeane Gist: It was very difficult to flirt with anybody when you're in the park. If you wanted to flirt, because you weren't allowed to talk to him if you weren't properly introduced, so there's the language of the gloves. And one of the things would be that if you folded them very carefully that means that you're telling someone to get rid of your company. If you fanned yourself like this with your gloves then that means "I would like your company." If you did this, this hasn't changed, if you slapped your hand or palm that means you're displeased. There's a whole language. You can say, "I love you." You can say, "Kiss me." You can say all kinds of things with your gloves.

Another one is your fan. You would attach your fan to a chatelaine. You would have a little pin with a chain and a hook, and you would hook it on, so that then when you needed it you just unhooked it, and it would still be attached to your chain. And you would fan yourself. Again, you used your fans, as we know, to flirt, and you were very flirt with them. If you were fanning very quickly that would mean “I’m engaged.” You might have to make eye contact with the person and then [*demonstrates*].

Deeanne Gist: Ok, so I’m going to model for you. [*Gist does so. Applause.*]

Announcer: And I’d like to thank Deeanne Gist for dressing herself this morning. [*Laughter and more applause.*]

Deeanne Gist: I can breathe. I’m very comfortable. As I walk to the 8th floor to get my room key that I left in my room, my posture will be great. When I’m sitting, my posture is great. I wouldn’t want to eat a big meal. I imagine that that’s why they ate just little bitty things, because there’s no room for bloating.

Workshop Attendee: Would they change to a different outfit, maybe a shorter corset or something, to eat?

Deeanne Gist: No, no. They would usually—. The short corsets were if you were doing some kind of athletic something—riding or canoeing or something like that.

Workshop Attendee: Would you wear gloves even in the summertime?

Deeanne Gist: All the time, but perhaps there wouldn’t be leather gloves in the summer. Maybe you’d get some lace gloves or some lighter gloves, but you definitely absolutely never went without your gloves.

Workshop Attendee: There’s referred to in some of my books corset covers.

Deeanne Gist: Yes.

Workshop Attendee: You didn't put one on. Why is—?

Deeanne Gist: That's an excellent question, and the corset cover is for maybe when you're wearing that shirtwaist, and it's sheer, and you're just wearing your belt. So you might wear it for modesty. Sometimes if you've got a really expensive shirtwaist or something that you're wearing, and you want to make sure you don't have to wash it or get it dirty, you would put a corset cover on it. To protect the corset in case it got wet. You didn't want to get your corset dirty. Just to give you a layer between the corset and whatever you are wearing on top, your waistcoat and whatever else.

Workshop Attendee: Thank you very much. Beautiful.

Deeanne Gist: You're very welcome. Thank you! Thank you, girls!

Workshop Attendee: May I please take a picture with you?

Deeanne Gist: Of course! Come on, sweetheart.

Workshop Attendee: Who's going to do it for me? [*Laughs.*] Please. Thank you!

In what ways does your own clothing choice restrict movement? Do you sit differently in jeans and short skirts? What messages do you try to send to others with your clothing—either clothing choice or actions such as putting your hands in your pockets? If you're an author, what choices have you made for your characters (in any subgenre) and why?

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