

# HOW COSTUME TELLS THE STORY: AN INTERSEMIOTIC ANALYSIS OF *ME BEFORE YOU*

## COMO FIGURINOS CONTAM A HISTÓRIA: UMA ANÁLISE INTERSEMIÓTICA DE *COMO EU ERA ANTES DE VOCÊ*

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**ABSTRACT:** *This study analyses the poetics of costume in Jojo Moyes's novel Me Before You and its film adaptation through the lens of Peircean semiotics. Adopting a qualitative approach, it draws on bibliographic and documentary research to investigate how clothing functions as a semiotic resource that generates meaning and contributes to characterisation. The focus lies on Louisa Clark's wardrobe and its transformations throughout the narrative, examining how costume articulates identity, psychological transformation, and social context. By interpreting garments as indexical and symbolic signs, the study explores how verbal and audiovisual elements are employed to shape interpretation. The findings underscore the role of costume in the construction of meaning, demonstrating how clothing mediates narrative perception and emotional engagement across literary and cinematic texts.*

**KEYWORDS:** *semiotics; intersemiotic translation; literature; cinema; costume.*

**RESUMO:** *Este estudo analisa a poética do figurino no romance Como Eu Era Antes de Você, de Jojo Moyes, e em sua adaptação cinematográfica à luz da Semiótica peirceana. Adotando uma abordagem qualitativa, o trabalho fundamenta-se na pesquisa bibliográfica e documental para investigar como o vestuário funciona como um recurso semiótico gerador de sentido e contribui para a caracterização das personagens. O foco recai sobre o guarda-roupa de Louisa Clark e suas transformações ao longo da narrativa, examinando como o figurino articula identidade, transformação psicológica e contexto social. Ao interpretar as vestimentas como signos indiciais e simbólicos, o estudo explora como elementos verbais e audiovisuais são empregados para orientar a interpretação. Os resultados ressaltam o papel do figurino na construção de sentidos, demonstrando como o vestuário medeia a percepção narrativa e o envolvimento emocional tanto no texto literário quanto na obra cinematográfica.*

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** *semiótica; tradução intersemiótica; literatura; cinema; figurino.*

## 1 Introduction

Narratives rely on a wide range of components to produce meaning, including setting, character, and discourse. In constructing a coherent sequence of events, distinct aspects of these elements interact to build the atmosphere, depict actions and establish the tone of the situations presented. Among them, costume emerges as a significant expressive resource because of its dramatic function (Acom, 2016). The way characters are dressed has implications for the interpretation of the text across multiple dimensions: contextual (providing clues about setting), political (signalling power relations), subjective (revealing personality and identity traits), sensory (evoking perceptual responses through colour, texture, shape, material, and movement), and affective (conveying feelings and emotions).

Together, these dimensions constitute what we propose and define here as the *poetics of costume*, understood as the ensemble of garments, footwear, accessories, coiffure, and make-up that construct a character's image and actions in storytelling. Whether in prose, poetry, theatre, cinema, or other forms of fictional creation, costume serves as a powerful semiotic device, communicating features of a character's background, behaviours, interpersonal relationships, and psychological disposition. In doing so, it generates aesthetic and interpretative effects that shape how readers perceive and engage with the narrative.

With this in mind, this article examines the poetics of costume in the intersemiotic translation of the novel *Me Before You* into film. Our discussion draws on Plaza's (2003) concept of intersemiotic translation as a creative process of transforming signs between different semiotic systems – in this case, from literature to cinema. Accordingly, we analyse how the costume-related descriptions of Louisa Clark in Jojo Moyes's literary text are reconfigured as visual signs in Thea Sharrock's film adaptation.

Our analysis is informed by Peirce's (2005) semiotics, according to which a sign is anything capable of producing meaning in the mind of an interpreter. To explain how phenomena are apprehended, the author proposes three phenomenological categories: firstness (the realm of pure possibility, quality, and feeling), secondness (associated with actuality, fact, and reaction), and thirdness (which concerns mediation, habit, and generality). These categories underpin one of his principal trichotomies of signs: icon, index, and symbol. *Icons* signify through resemblance and shared qualities; *indices* through a causal connection with the object they represent; and *symbols* through conventions and learned rules.

This study adopts a qualitative approach and relies on bibliographic research and documentary analysis as its methodological procedures. Bibliographic research provides the theoretical foundation for the discussion, whereas documentary analysis is employed to examine the novel *Me Before You* and its film adaptation as the primary documents constituting the research corpus. The investigation unfolded in three stages. First, we selected passages from the novel and scenes from the film in which costume functions as a relevant sign. Second, we identified the formal strategies through which the poetics of costume is constructed, such as literary description and art direction. Third, we conducted an intersemiotic reading of the transformations undergone by costume-related signs as they are translated from verbal to audiovisual language.

Building on this introduction, the article comprises five main sections. It begins by examining the role of fashion in literature, followed by a discussion of costume in film studies. It then outlines the methodological procedures adopted in the study. Next, it analyses the poetics of costume in both Moyes's novel and Sharrock's film adaptation. Finally, it concludes with some closing remarks.

## ***2 Literature, fashion, and the construction of meaning***

The relationship between literature and fashion has been increasingly understood as one in which clothing serves not merely as an ornamental addition to fictional narratives but as one of their structuring elements (Salomon, 2011, 2020). Within this perspective, dress contributes simultaneously to the production of verisimilitude, the construction of characters, and the representation of historical and cultural realities. According to Salomon (2011), descriptions of garments lend fiction a sense of credibility by grounding imaginary worlds in recognisable social practices, while also serving as a literary strategy that guides readers through the narrative. At the same time, references to clothing preserve habits, customs, values, and modes of life, making literary texts a valuable source for investigating the history of fashion and its social uses.

The narrative functions attributed to clothing are inseparable from its role in shaping fictional identities. Salomon (2011, p. 103) characterises dress as “a living act”<sup>1</sup> that participates in the (de)construction of identity by articulating psychological, material, and aesthetic features. As a result, clothing becomes a means of self-fashioning, allowing characters to conceal aspects

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<sup>1</sup> In the source text: “um ato vivo”.

of their selfhood or adopt desired personae. Its narrative significance also lies in its capacity to sustain ambiguity. To illustrate this point, Salomon (2011) refers to *Dom Casmurro*, by the Brazilian author Machado de Assis, a novel in which Capitu's attire forms part of the broader narrative strategy to maintain ambiguity and irony. This example reinforces the view that dress operates as an active component of characterisation rather than a descriptive accessory.

This understanding is supported by the conception of clothing as language. According to Salomon (2011), dress constitutes an act of signification whose meanings extend beyond visual appearance. Literary descriptions possess a marked synaesthetic potential, allowing readers to imagine textures, smells, and tactile sensations through verbal language. Individual garments may function as arbitrary signs, yet their incorporation into literary discourse transforms them into carriers of multiple interpretative possibilities (Salomon, 2011). Because clothing is embedded within the social dynamics that organise collective life, it also communicates intentions, positions, and values, placing acts of dress at the centre of complex social relations.

Questions of class, gender, and morality further demonstrate how costume mediates representations of society in literature. Salomon (2020) argues that literary depictions of dress make social hierarchies visible by associating clothing with prestige and distinction, demonstrating this claim with Gil Vicente's plays, where dressing well serves as a marker of social status. The author goes on to assert that variations in clothing also register the tensions between social classes and the marked gender dichotomies represented in nineteenth-century literature. In this line, Salomon (2011) notes that the material qualities of clothing may acquire moral significance in storytelling. To underscore this point, she discusses Machado de Assis's short story *A Igreja do Diabo* (*The Devil's church*), in which the opposition of cotton and silk fringes symbolises the enduring contradiction between vice and virtue. The example indicates how the material properties of garments become meaningful within literary discourse, operating as semiotic resources that exceed a purely descriptive function.

These perspectives have also informed methodological discussions concerning the relationship between literature and fashion. In Salomon's (2011) view, literary texts are presented as indispensable sources for fashion studies because they portray clothing dynamically, linking garments to bodies, gestures, and movement rather than treating them as static artefacts. Such representations, following the author, make possible a sociological analysis of clothing in use, examining dress as a contextualised social practice rather than as an isolated material object. Salomon (2020) maintains that the growing academic interest in this

field, particularly in Brazil after 2010, reflects the consolidation of fashion as a productive framework for literary interpretation and interdisciplinary inquiry.

Moreover, the idea of costume as a system of signification can also be found in research that investigates literary dress through a Peircean semiotic perspective. Although these studies analyse different literary works and draw on distinct Peircean concepts, they share an interest in explaining how clothing functions as a sign whose interpretation depends on cultural knowledge and on the activity of the interpreter (Dattilo, 2023; Proni, 2022; Marques, 2005). Their analyses focus on the semiotic processes through which literary representations of dress acquire meaning within particular social and cultural contexts, with particular attention to the relationship between clothing, identity, and social classification.

In her semiotic analysis of Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the wind* and its film adaptation, Dattilo (2023) examines women's dress as a semiotic system capable of conveying fragments of ideology, culture, and history. Particular attention is given to Scarlett O'Hara's improvised dress, whose colours and fabrics are interpreted as signs of psychological states while also positioning the character in relation to the gender codes of the period. Focusing on Edgar Allan Poe's *The man of the crowd* and G. K. Chesterton's *The invisible man*, Marques (2005) shows how attire functions as a visual clue for classifying urban subjects and distinguishing social groups within the nineteenth-century metropolis. Proni (2022), in his analysis of Hans Christian Andersen's *The emperor's new clothes*, approaches fashion from a different angle, arguing that it operates as a social convention capable of sustaining public identity and social hierarchies even in the absence of a material garment.

Despite relying on different concepts, these studies consistently attribute meaning to the interaction between signs, interpreters, and cultural context rather than to clothing itself. The dynamic nature of semiosis also emerges as a shared methodological concern. Abductive reasoning underpins the interpretation of dress by allowing observers to formulate hypotheses from vestimentary signs, whether these involve Scarlett O'Hara's improvised dress (Dattilo, 2023), Andersen's invisible garments (Proni, 2022), or the clothing worn by the anonymous figures who populate Poe's urban landscape (Marques, 2005). In each case, literary narratives underscore how garments participate in broader processes of social communication because their meanings depend upon collectively shared conventions and interpretative practices. Fashion therefore functions simultaneously as a system of signs, a mechanism of social organisation, and a means through which literary texts negotiate identity, hierarchy, and cultural values. From this standpoint, the poetics of costume in literature emerges through the interplay of textual description, characterisation, and the reader's material and symbolic horizons.

### ***3 Cinema, costume, and visual discourse***

Costume has long occupied an ambiguous position within film studies. Frequently associated with spectacle or historical reconstruction, it has also been recognised as an integral component of cinematic language, capable of shaping narrative, characterisation, and spectators' engagement with the fictional world. Far from being an isolated visual element, costume participates in a wider network of signs through which films build identity, social relations, and dramatic progression. Discussions of costume design have consequently moved beyond questions of style or authenticity to consider how clothing produces meaning within the cinematic text.

Street (2001) approaches costume as a system governed by multiple and often overlapping influences, including realism, genre, performance, status, and power. Clothing acquires meaning through its relationship with the narrative and with the social and cultural codes that audiences recognise. In this line, the spectator does not encounter garments as neutral objects but as visual signs that contribute to the construction of characters and situations. This understanding challenges the notion of costume as a mere decorative addition to the image, instead situating it within the film's communicative structure.

Costume also contributes to narrative economy by conveying information that might otherwise require dialogue or exposition. Through clothing, films can establish relationships, occupations, and social hierarchies with considerable efficiency. This communicative capacity derives from the cultural conventions attached to garments: a tailored suit, a worn uniform, or an extravagant dress carries associations that exceed its material form and positions costume as a visual sign shaped by the interaction between cinematic representation and cultural knowledge. Within a Peircean framework, these signifying processes may involve different relations between sign, object (what the sign represents), and interpretant (idea created in the interpreter's mind). Costume can operate as an icon by evoking institutionalised aesthetic styles, historical periods, or cultural identities; as an index by pointing to aspects of a character's social position, occupation, or emotional state; and as a symbol through conventions that connect particular garments, hairstyles, or colours to shared meanings. In audiovisual language, these dimensions often overlap, allowing clothing to generate meaning through multiple semiotic relations at once.

Bruzzi's (1997) work shifts the discussion from costume as a narrative support to costume as an expressive system in its own right. Moving away from evaluations of clothing

based solely on its ability to reinforce character psychology or narrative coherence, she argues that costume possesses an autonomous visual discourse capable of generating meanings that exceed the demands of the plot. Such a position challenges the longstanding assumption that successful costume design should remain unobtrusive, since clothing does not lose its narrative value when it attracts attention to itself. Moments in which costume becomes visually conspicuous reveal its capacity to function beyond narrative realism, inviting spectators to engage not only with what characters wear but also with the meanings produced by the appearance, movement, and materiality of clothing itself.

Costume therefore operates as a performative element of the *mise-en-scène*, directing the spectator's gaze and facilitating the construction of cinematic experience. Bruzzi (1997) develops this argument through her discussion of iconic clothes, suggesting that certain garments gain cultural value that surpasses the films in which they first appeared and become recognisable visual objects. Their significance derives not only from the narrative situations that originally motivated them but also from their aesthetic and symbolic presence. In these instances, costume becomes a producer of meaning whose relevance extends beyond the fictional world, establishing a visual discourse that coexists with the narrative without being entirely dependent upon it.

This emphasis on the autonomy of costume also informs Bruzzi's (1997) understanding of identity. According to the author, identity is constructed through dress rather than merely revealed by it. Costume does not simply express who a character is; it participates in the continuous production of that identity on screen. The spectator encounters what Bruzzi (1997) describes as the *clothed image*, reading the surface presented by costume before any presumed psychological depth beneath it. From a Peircean perspective, this process begins with the immediate visual qualities of clothing – its colours, textures, shapes, and movement – which correspond to the level of firstness. As costume is connected to the body, to other characters, and to the narrative context, these qualities acquire indexical relations aligned with secondness. Their interpretation is ultimately completed through culturally shared norms that enable spectators to recognise identity, gender, social status, or power, a process that corresponds to thirdness. Characterisation consequently emerges through visual performance as much as through dialogue and action, positioning clothing as a central component of cinematic representation.

Questions of gender and power further demonstrate the productive capacity of costume. Bruzzi (1997) argues that clothing mediates the performance of gender, making visible identities that are neither fixed nor independent of appearance. Garments associated with

authority, masculinity, or femininity do more than signify these categories; they actively participate in their construction. A suit, for example, functions as a visual language through which power and virility are negotiated, while a low-cut dress generates meanings linked to womanhood and sensuality in cultural discourse. Because clothing participates in the construction of cinematic identity, it also shapes the spectator's engagement with costume. Bruzzi (1997) maintains that viewers respond not only to what clothing reveals about a character but also to its texture, silhouette, and movement, deriving aesthetic pleasure from its visual presence independently of narrative development. Costume thus becomes an object of visual fascination as well as narrative meaning, directing attention to the ways in which surface and spectacle contribute to the cinematic experience.

Although Street (2001) and Bruzzi (1997) assign different degrees of autonomy to costume, their approaches are not incompatible. Street locates the significance of clothing primarily within its contribution to narrative coherence, characterisation and verisimilitude, emphasising the ways in which spectators interpret dress as part of the fictional world. Bruzzi, by contrast, draws attention to moments in which costume exceeds these narrative functions and produces meanings through its own visual presence. Taken together, their perspectives suggest that cinematic costume operates simultaneously as a narrative resource and as an expressive discourse. Considering the poetics of costume, clothing plays a role in storytelling by communicating identity, social position and emotional states, while also retaining the capacity to foreground its status as a visual object whose meanings cannot always be reduced to plot or character. This broader understanding of costume provides a productive theoretical basis for examining clothing as a cinematic sign capable of generating meaning through multiple, and sometimes overlapping, semiotic relations.

#### ***4 Methodological procedures***

The corpus brings together Moyes's novel *Me Before You* (2012) and Sharrock's film adaptation (2016), read here as distinct signifying works connected through intersemiotic translation. This qualitative, interpretative study combines bibliographic research (Garcia, 2016) with documentary analysis (Sá-Silva; Almeida; Guindani, 2009). The theoretical discussion on fashion, costume, cinema, and semiotics established the grounds from which we approached the two works. Close reading guided our engagement with Moyes's novel, with particular attention to descriptions of clothing, narratorial observations, dialogue, and Louisa's reflections on her appearance. We examined Sharrock's film through the visual configuration

of costume, including colour, fabric, silhouette, hairstyle, and the relationship between clothing, the body, and the surrounding *mise-en-scène*.

Louisa Clark's narrative trajectory provided the principle for delimiting the analytical corpus. Her clothes repeatedly enter the story when her sense of self is asserted, unsettled, or reconfigured. We selected passages and scenes in which costume contributes directly to characterisation, bears traces of emotional experience, makes social position perceptible, or changes significantly between the novel and film. The resulting corpus comprises Louisa's eccentric everyday outfits, the clothing choices associated with her traumatic experience, the borrowed suit worn for the job interview, the gradual darkening of her wardrobe, and the dresses featured in the concert and wedding episodes. Read together, these moments reveal a sustained vestimentary thread running through her development.

The analysis began with the particular garment, outfit, colour, or hairstyle foregrounded in each passage or scene. We observed its sensory qualities and the immediate impressions it might produce, followed its connection with Louisa's circumstances and relationships, and considered the cultural conventions through which it becomes legible. Peirce's (2005) categories of firstness, secondness, and thirdness informed this progression. His icon-index-symbol trichotomy helped us examine the relations activated by each costume sign, including how several such relations can coexist within the same garment. A dress, for instance, may carry indexical traces of an experience while drawing symbolic force from culturally sedimented meanings attached to colour, femininity, class, or occasion.

Plaza's (2003) concept of intersemiotic translation guided the comparison between the two works. For each selected moment, we traced the transformation of the costume sign as Moyes's verbal descriptions took audiovisual form in Sharrock's adaptation, noting the meanings preserved from the novel, the shifts in emphasis produced by the film, and the meanings generated through cinema's material and expressive possibilities. The comparison approached each passage and scene through the resources available within its semiotic system. It followed the ways Moyes and Sharrock construct Louisa's *clothed image* (Bruzzi, 1997) and invite interpretation. Within these limits, the poetics of costume serves as the analytical perspective developed in this article for examining the aesthetic, narrative, affective, and cultural meanings produced through dress in storytelling.

## ***5 The poetics of costume in Me Before You***

In *Me Before You*, Louisa Clark is a young woman in her mid-twenties who lives in a small English town and works a series of modest jobs to help support her family. Initially portrayed as cheerful and eccentric, she gradually emerges as a character shaped by self-doubt, limited aspirations, and a strong sense of responsibility towards those around her. One of her most distinctive traits is her unique style of dress. She favours brightly coloured clothing, mismatched patterns and textures, whimsical accessories, and unconventional combinations that set her apart from those around her. As such, her costumes become a significant source of meaning in the narrative, conveying aspects of her personality, social class, emotional state, and character development.

In the novel, fashion functions as an intentional element of characterisation, mirroring Louisa's quirky and playful nature. In Chapter 2, the protagonist frames her fashion choices as a key marker of self-expression:

Sometimes I think I dress the way I do because the one thing Treena can't do is put clothes together. She's a pullover-and-jeans kind of girl. Her idea of smart is ironing the jeans first.

My father calls me a "character," because I tend to say the first thing that pops into my head. My mother calls me "individual," which is her polite way of not quite understanding the way I dress.

But apart from a brief period in my teens, I never wanted to look like Treena, or any of the girls at school; I preferred boys' clothes till I was about fourteen, and now tend to please myself—depending on what mood I am in on the day. There's no point in me trying to look conventional. I am small, dark-haired, and, according to my dad, have the face of an elf. That's not as in "elfin beauty." I am not plain, but I don't think anyone is ever going to call me beautiful. I don't have that graceful thing going on (Moyes, 2012, p. 22).

In the excerpt, costume is presented as a defining feature of Louisa's identity. Rather than adopting the conventional styles of other women, she uses clothing to assert her sense of self within her social environment: "Apart from an exotic taste in clothes, and the fact that I'm a bit short, there's not a lot separating me from anyone you might pass in the street" (Moyes, 2012, p. 23). This testimony reinforces the notion of fashion as a device "capable of communicating and establishing individualism in a specific time and space" (Bortoletti; Berticelli, 2022, p. 3). Louisa also associates her attire with her emotional state, suggesting that dress operates as an external manifestation of her inner experience. Consequently, her costume becomes a meaningful sign that mediates how other characters perceive and interpret her, including members of her family. From a Peircean perspective, Louisa's clothing exemplifies secondness by establishing itself in relation to prevailing social conventions. Her distinctive style acquires meaning through its resistance to normative patterns of dress, making costume a sign of difference and individuality.

Moving further, Louisa's personal style stands as an index of unresolved emotional trauma. Throughout the novel, she recalls fragments of a night during which she became intoxicated with alcohol and drugs, lost consciousness, and was most likely sexually assaulted by a group of young men. In the aftermath of the incident, she coped by cutting off her hair and withdrawing from social life, spending long periods isolated in her room. The experience also left a lasting imprint on her sartorial choices, as she explains in Chapter 12,

I had worked out who I was, and it was someone very different from the giggling girl who got drunk with strangers. *It was someone who wore nothing that could be construed as suggestive.* Clothes that would not appeal to the kind of men who went to the Red Lion, anyway (Moyes, 2012, p. 163, emphasis added).

Louisa's reflection signals that her wardrobe is deeply conditioned by this traumatic event.

As Salomon (2011) suggests, clothing plays an active role in shaping and reshaping identity through the articulation of psychological, physical, and aesthetic dimensions. In Louisa's case, her clothing choices become part of the process through which she reconstructs and takes control of her identity, as she consciously selects garments that minimise the possibility of attracting unwanted male attention, resisting sexualised readings of her appearance. In this sense, costume acquires an indexical value: it bears the marks of a lived experience, revealing how past trauma continues to affect her self-presentation and her relationship with her own body.

In a similar vein, in the film, the construction of Louisa's aesthetic emerges as a vital visual element in conveying her affective journey and character development. Through costume design and art direction, the film translates the novel's sartorial descriptions into cinematic language, stressing key aspects of both the narrative and Louisa's character arc. At the beginning of the film, she is dressed in colourful, patterned, and cheerful outfits that reflect her vibrant and optimistic nature (Figure 1). Her hairstyle likewise departs from conventional expectations for a woman of her age, reinforcing her eccentricity and, more profoundly, signalling her desire to avoid being sexualised. Although simple, her clothing is highly expressive, underscoring her distinctive style and individuality. Together, these fashion choices reinforce a *clothed image* (Bruzzi, 1997) of youthfulness, innocence, and vitality, in accordance with her description in the novel. As Acom (2016, p. 126, our translation) notes,

In this manner, the costume designer seeks to evoke all the forms of estrangement and the defining characteristics that the original text elicits in the reader-author who reads and re-creates it in another semiotic domain. This process of translation into costume

involves stripping away layers of meaning and unveiling signs in order to encounter the character on stage, materialising their identity.<sup>2</sup>

Figure 1 – Louisa’s cheerful outfits



Source: *Me Before You* (2016).

Nöth and Jungk (2015) argue that filmmaking techniques can produce political, psychological, intellectual, and emotional meanings. Accordingly, clothing becomes more than a component of costume design; it operates as a narrative device that contributes to meaning-making by revealing aspects of the characters that cannot be conveyed through internal narration. In this sense, clothing presentation can be seen as an indexical sign in cinema, as it refers to personality traits, social contexts, and individual histories. Louisa’s colourful clothes index her spontaneity and optimism, whereas the Traynors’ refined, monochromatic wardrobe points to their more reserved personalities. Costume therefore constitutes one of the resources through which the film translates information that, in the literary text, is conveyed verbally,

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<sup>2</sup> In the source text: “Dessa forma, o figurinista busca despertar todas as estranhezas e caracteres que o original provoca no leitor-autor que lê e re-cria o texto em outros domínios. Essa operação de tradução em figurino é um processo de desvestimento de significados, desocultamento de signos para ir ao encontro do personagem em cena, da materialização de sua identidade”.

illustrating how meaning is reconstructed rather than simply transferred from one medium to another.

As the story unfolds and Louisa encounters increasingly demanding emotional experiences, the colour palette of her wardrobe gradually changes. Bright, lively hues give way to darker, more subdued tones, such as grey, black, and navy blue (Figure 2). Furthermore, she adheres to more traditional hair styles in some scenes. This transformation is not merely aesthetic; it serves as a visual expression of her emotional development. The progressive shift in her wardrobe enables the audience to perceive her psychological journey without the need for explicit verbal explanation.

Figure 2 – Louisa's dark outfits



Source: *Me Before You* (2016).

Moreover, costume functions as an index of Louisa's social class. Before attending her job interview with the Traynor family, she remarks that she cannot afford to buy a suit for the occasion and therefore borrows one of her mother's old outfits. During the interview, the contrast between her clothing and Camilla Traynor's elegant, expensive attire heightens her awareness of the social distance separating them. In this context, Louisa perceives her clothing as an index of her modest socioeconomic background: "It was as if I were being studied. Not

necessarily in a good way. My mother's shirt felt suddenly cheap, the synthetic threads shining in the thin light" (Moyes, 2012, p. 28). Within a Peircean framework, the costume acquires an indexical value because it points to Louisa's material circumstances through a direct existential connection.

Her experience illustrates Salomon's (2011) argument that dress functions as a meaningful social practice involved in the construction of identity. Her clothing does more than reflect her economic circumstances; it becomes one of the ways through which social differences are perceived and negotiated. In this sense, the opposition between Louisa's borrowed outfit and Camilla Traynor's polished attire recalls Salomon's (2020) discussion of how literary representations of dress make class hierarchies visible by associating clothing with prestige and distinction.

The description of the Traynor family's appearance, especially Camilla's, emphasises the refinement and quality of their clothing, conveying a sense of grace and eminence: "A woman's face appeared, middle-aged but beautiful, under expensive precision-cut hair. She was wearing a trouser suit that I guessed cost more than my dad earned in a month" (Moyes, 2012, p. 25-26). In the film, this characterisation is translated into a wardrobe composed of impeccably tailored shirts, trousers, suits, and carefully selected jewellery, all of which signal the family's affluent lifestyle (Figure 3, right side). The Clark family, by comparison, is dressed in simpler, more casual clothing, reinforcing the relaxed and welcoming atmosphere of Louisa's home (Figure 3, left side). *Following Street* (2001), these contrasting sartorial choices establish a visual system through which social differences become immediately legible.

Figure 3 – Contrast between the Traynors' and the Clark's wardrobes



Source: *Me Before You* (2016).

Bruzzi's (1997) perspective expands this interpretation by maintaining that costume does more than support narrative realism. The Traynors' restrained elegance and the Clarks' everyday attire contribute to the construction of marked visual identities, rendering social difference perceptible even before it is fully articulated through the narrative. Costume therefore shapes the spectator's understanding not only by reflecting class distinctions but also by actively configuring them as part of the film's iconographic discourse. Interpreted through Peirce's semiotics, these garments operate simultaneously as indices of each family's social circumstances and as symbols whose meanings derive from culturally shared associations between particular styles of dress and notions of refinement, affluence, and ordinariness. Their significance thus emerges through the interplay between costume, narrative context, and the audience's interpretative repertoire.

In the novel, the interview episode also presents the suit as a symbol of social imposition grounded in thirdness. At her mother's insistence, Louisa wears it in accordance with conventional expectations of appropriate outfit for a job interview with a wealthy family. Yet the garment neither fits her properly nor embodies her personality, eventually tearing apart during the encounter. In this context, the borrowed suit symbolises the pressure to comply with

social norms at the expense of her individuality. Its poor fit and eventual destruction operate as metaphors for Louisa's resistance to these dominant assumptions, signalling her refusal to suppress her authentic self in order to meet established standards. As the interview unfolds, she recognises that the attempt to conform was misguided: "I should just have worn my plainest trousers and a shirt. Anything but this suit" (Moyes, 2012, p. 28).

In the film, when Louisa visits the job centre in search of work opportunities, the employment adviser suggests that she reconsider her appearance, remarking, "It's not far from your home, but you might need to do something about your wardrobe for this one" (Me Before You, 2016, 00:05:43). Following this advice, Louisa wears her mother's suit (Figure 4) to the job interview with the Traynors, seeking to project seriousness, professionalism, and determination to her prospective employers. This transformation is reflected in both the structured silhouette of the ensemble and its palette of black, white and grey. The fabric, tailored cut, and dark tones serve as indices of the formal and conservative atmosphere associated with the workplace she hopes to enter. Her choice of attire signifies a willingness to embrace new challenges and step beyond her comfort zone, while also revealing an effort to meet the expectations of her potential employers.

Figure 4 – Louisa in her mother's suit



Source: <https://br.pinterest.com/pin/479140847852645978/>. Accessed on 30 Jul. 2026.

In both narratives, a pivotal moment occurs when Louisa chooses her outfit for a concert with Will. In the novel, she explains her reasoning:

I discarded outfit number three — a pair of yellow wide-legged trousers — already anticipating Will’s Rupert Bear references and instead put on my fourth option, a vintage dress in dark-red satin. It was made for a more frugal generation and I always had to say a secret prayer that the zip would make it up past my waist, but it gave me the outline of a 1950s starlet, and it was a “results” dress, one of those outfits you couldn’t help but feel good in. I put a silver bolero over my shoulders, tied a grey silk scarf around my neck to cover up my cleavage, applied some matching lipstick, and then stepped into the living room (Moyes, 2012, p. 209).

Will immediately questions her decision to wear a scarf and a bolero over such a dress, suggesting that these additions conceal her body and undermine the effect the outfit is meant to create: “Look, Clark, if you’re going to wear a dress like that you need to wear it with confidence. You need to fill it mentally as well as physically” (Moyes, 2012, p. 210). The low-cut dress, with its elegant design, marks the beginning of Louisa’s openness to new experiences and her gradual reconnection with her womanhood after the traumatic incident that had profoundly altered her relationship with clothing. In the film, the combination of the exposed décolletage and the red tone (Figure 5) conveys a subtle sensuality while also evoking a classic, romantic aesthetic, in line with Street’s (2001) argument concerning the expressive role of costume in cinema. Interpreted through Peirce’s category of thirdness, the red hue acquires symbolic significance, representing the emerging emotional bond between Louisa and Will and marking the moment when he begins to recognise her beauty.

Figure 5 – Louisa in her dark-red satin dress



Source: *Me Before You* (2016).

Furthermore, the choice of dress in Alice and Rupert's wedding scene exemplifies how the novel and the film construct meaning through different semiosis. In the novel, Louisa wears the same dark-red satin dress for two reasons grounded in the affective domain: to please Will and to reinforce her own sense of self-assurance. She explains that she wishes to offer him emotional support as he faces the distressing experience of watching his ex-girlfriend marry one of his closest friends. She also acknowledges her apprehension about being judged by the other guests because of her working-class background:

I decided to wear my red dress — partly because I knew Will liked it (and I figured today he was going to need all the minor boosts he could get) — but also because I didn't actually have any other dresses that I felt brave enough to wear at such a gathering. Will had no idea of the fear I felt at the thought of going to a society wedding, let alone as "the help." Every time I thought of the braying voices, the assessing glances in our direction, I wanted to spend the day watching Patrick run in circles instead. Perhaps it was shallow of me to even care, but I couldn't help it. The thought of those guests looking down on both of us was already tying my stomach in knots (Moyes, 2012, p. 330).

In the cinematic adaptation, however, the choice of a different dress (Figure 6) prioritises visual impact while remaining less closely connected to the character's social and emotional universe. The light blue colour and delicate floral pattern are consistent with Louisa's defining personality traits, whereas the deeply cut neckline may signify the growing romantic and sexual tension between her and Will. The dress expresses her authenticity, suggesting that she has become comfortable presenting herself without regard for others' judgement.

Figure 6 – Louisa's wedding outfit



Source: <https://gshow.globo.com/cultura-pop/famosos/noticia/como-eu-era-antes-de-voce-emilia-clarke-e-sam-claflin-sao-amigos-e-moram-na-inglaterra.ghtml>. Accessed on 30 Jul. 2026.

In summary, the analysis of the poetics of costumes in *Me Before You* demonstrates that attire plays a central role in the construction of Louisa Clark's identity, serving as a means of

conveying her personality and articulating both her self-perception and the ways in which she relates to others. Her sartorial choices also embody emotional responses to past and present experiences, revealing the lasting impact of memory and personal transformation. Moreover, costume exposes power relations by marking distinctions of social class and foregrounding the inequalities that shape the characters' lives and interactions. In both the novel and the film adaptation, costume functions as a semiotic resource through which meaning emerges from the interplay between narrative development and the cultural conventions that inform the audience's interpretation.

## **6 Final remarks**

This article examined the poetics of costume in the intersemiotic translation of *Me Before You* from literature to cinema. Through the analysis of Jojo Moyes's novel and Thea Sharrock's film adaptation, we argued that costume works as an integral component of storytelling, generating meanings related to identity, social class, psychological transformation, and interpersonal relationships. The discussion underscored how verbal descriptions of dress are translated into visual signs, preserving, transforming, or expanding their meanings in accordance with the affordances of each semiotic system.

Our study was grounded primarily in Peirce's semiotics, particularly the phenomenological categories of firstness, secondness, and thirdness, as well as the icon–index–symbol trichotomy, which enabled us to explain how costume shapes meaning-making through multiple and overlapping semiotic relations. Plaza's (2003) concept of intersemiotic translation provided the theoretical basis for understanding adaptation not as a process of simple equivalence but as a creative transformation of signs across different media. At the same time, the contributions of Salomon (2011, 2020) highlighted clothing as a narrative language capable of constructing fictional identities and representing social and cultural values, while Street (2001) and Bruzzi (1997) allowed us to conceive costume simultaneously as a narrative device, an expressive visual discourse, and a constitutive element of cinematic identity.

The study maintained that Louisa Clark's wardrobe consistently operates as a dynamic means of signification. In this sense, clothing assumes a pivotal function in the representation of her character, communicating emotional states, indexing traumatic experiences, marking socioeconomic differences, negotiating gender expectations, and visually registering her gradual transformation throughout the narrative. The intersemiotic reading of the novel and the film indicated that the adaptation recreates these meanings through cinematic resources such as

design, colour, texture, and hairstyle, allowing visual language to communicate information that, in the literary text, is frequently conveyed through narration and internal reflection. Consequently, costume emerges as a central mechanism through which literature and cinema construct characterisation and guide audience interpretation.

The discussion demonstrated that the poetics of costume provides a productive framework for understanding how clothing functions as a semiotic resource, intertwining narrative construction, identity, culture, and visual representation. Future research may expand this discussion by examining other literary adaptations and investigating how costume establishes itself as a compelling storytelling attribute. Such studies may further explore the ways in which clothing mediates identity, social representation, and cultural meaning across different contexts. Ultimately, this article contributes to scholarship on literary adaptation by foregrounding costume as a valuable analytical category for comprehending how meanings are created, transformed, and reconfigured in the transition from verbal to audiovisual forms.

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