

...Reading Between the Clothes...

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Introduction

“We find ourselves in the desert. A plane has crashed.” These are the words of a female narrator amongst the steady sound of a ticking clock reverberating throughout the arena. Guests are seated in a circular room facing inward towards a sandy circle, neatly paved to be flat. In the center is a white two-seater plane. It is dug neatly into the gray sand below. On the edges of the stage are numbers and tick marks of a clock. Above are various paper stars and paper bulbs hanging from the ceiling. The ending result is a scene that transforms the room into the page of a storybook. As soon as the narrator’s voice is broadcasted, the audience is immersed into the story of *The Little Prince*.

This paper is a critical analysis of Thom Browne’s interpretation and use of the story of *The Little Prince* in his fall 2023 collection at New York Fashion Week on February 14th, 2023. The format of this paper is as follows: a brief summary of the story of *The Little Prince*, an broad analysis of the story’s connection to the Thom Browne brand, an discussion of elements used in the show including the snake, adulthood, and time, followed by an analysis of how this decision implicates the relationship between literary history and modern high fashion. In sum, the thoughtful integration of *The Little Prince* in Browne’s show serves as evidence of the continuation of literary influence in high fashion and teaches a lesson about taking oneself, or one’s clothes, too seriously.

A Summary of The Little Prince

Published in 1943, *The Little Prince* is a story written by French aviator and author Antoine de Saint-Exupéry. The narrator is an adult pilot who crash-lands in a desert. Upon landing, he meets a small boy from a small asteroid planet who he calls “the little prince.. Over

the next few days, the prince tells the narrator about his life. After a human-like rose grows on the planet, the prince falls in love until the rose's demands become too overwhelming for the prince. The prince leaves and travels to several asteroids, each of which represent an adult with a specific role and flaw. The prince's last meeting is with a geographer who recommends that he visits Earth.

At this point, the narrator and the little prince have now spent eight days in the desert together and are out of water to drink. The prince tells the narrator that he will return to his home planet and rose. Since the prince will be living on one of the stars, he tells the narrator that stars will now have a special meaning. In order to return home, the prince must allow a poisonous snake to bite him. At the conclusion, which is six years later, the narrator notes that the prince's body was missing in the morning and so the prince must have returned to his planet. At the end, the narrator asks the reader to tell him if he or she ever spots the little prince.

Brand and Story

The overall message of *The Little Prince* is to find beauty in unexpected places. Specifically, the fox that the prince meets on Earth says, "It is only with the heart that one can see rightly: what is essential is invisible to the eye." In his travels from planet to planet, the little prince is taught insightful messages about human nature from the different characters he meets. The ending result is a beautiful collection of lessons from these characters that renew the heart of both the narrator and little prince.

The concept of finding beauty in unexpected places resonates deeply with the Thom Browne brand. From the very beginning of the company, Browne sought to reimagine the classic gray suit. His website shares that "Thom Browne is widely recognized for redefining modern

tailoring.” ..While his collection has expanded to clothes beyond suits, the “grey suit remains elemental to all he does, signifying a singular point-of-view and the commitment to exceptional quality in fabrics and tailoring.” Thus, while Browne designs clothing that is far from traditional professional attire, he is loyal to the unassuming gray suit. Browne’s work finds beauty in the traditional and the formal gray suit, an unexpected place, much like the journey of the prince.

The Snake

The decision to incorporate the story of *The Little Prince*, particularly the snake in the story, is also connected to Thom Browne’s personal history, specifically his religious education.

The prince in the story meets the snake when he visits Earth. The snake only speaks in riddles, but he does not ask questions or require answers, making him one of the least complex characters in the story. However, he still has an important role. He possesses a poisonous bite that allows for the prince to be able to return home. Many interpretations of the story suggest that the snake represents the unavoidable and absolution of death.

The snake is a crucial character in the bible, specifically in the Creation story. In the third chapter of Genesis, a serpent instructs Adam and Eve to eat from the fruit of the tree. This marks the beginning of original sin. So while the serpent does not induce death on Adam or Eve, he represents the “death” of purity of heart and is consequential for the rest of biblical history. Thus, while the consequences of interacting with the snake differ for Adam and Eve than the prince, the snake is regardless a critical figure in changing the sequences of events.

Notably, Browne attended the University of Notre Dame, an institution famously known for its Catholic character and following of Catholic teachings, like the stories of Genesis. While it is unclear if Browne is religious himself presently, he grew up in a Catholic household. In the

show, the snake was incorporated into the show with one model wearing a tight gray ensemble with hair twisted in a snake-like shape. The involvement of the snake, like in the story, was consequential for the rest of the show. Regardless, the decision to tell the story of the Little Prince by Browne can be traced back to his personal history.

Adulthood

The Thom Browne brand, despite mostly creating adult clothing, has proven itself to be deeply connected to childlike inspirations and fairytales. For example, Browne's Spring 2023 show was influenced by the story of Cinderella. Moreover, Thom Browne's personal background makes sense for him to integrate lessons about adulthood into his work.

The story of *The Little Prince* presents a critique of the narrow-minded and hypocritical nature of adulthood. Each of the six planets that the prince visits is inhabited by an adult that represents a persona of this narrow-minded adult. For example, one planet is inhabited by a merchant, or businessman, who endlessly counts the stars in order to "own" them rather than appreciating the stars' beauty.

Thom Browne, while never explicitly critical of the business profession, left his first job post-college in accounting. In a recent talk given at his alma mater, the University of Notre Dame, he spoke to the audience about how his decision to study accounting in college may seem ironic given his career path. While grateful for his education in Notre Dame's Mendoza College of Business, he remarked that he wished he had been able to encounter someone like himself while a student at Notre Dame. If given this opportunity, he hypothesized, he would have felt more encouraged to pursue his interest in fashion as a 20-year old.

Thus, the connection between Thom Browne's journey to the fashion industry amidst his background in business is subtly nodded to in the show and the message is clear: business professionals should not be blind to the beauty of what they are creating or could be creating. After all, had Browne not left his job in accounting, the beauty of his designs would cease to exist.

The Clock and Time

The runway and stage of the show was outlined with large black numbers and tick marks that resembled a clock, and the sound of a clock ticking throughout the entire 32 minute show. In addition, several of the outfits, particularly bags, incorporated a clock. Notably, the clocks on the bags increased in time as the show progressed, perhaps alluding to time running out for the prince to return to his home planet.

In *The Little Prince*, clocks and time serve as a metaphor for the absurdity of adulthood concerns about obtaining wealth. For example, the prince meets a railway switchman who is obsessed with following a strict schedule, and a businessman who spends his time counting the stars. Both of these encounters demonstrate the foolishness of adulthood obsessions in a child's eyes, who sees life as free without the constraints of time.

However, the repeated use of time in the show also suggests that Browne was intentionally trying to send a message about time. One could hypothesize that the constant allusions to time were references to one of Browne's influences for this show: Meghan Sullivan, Professor of Philosophy at the University of Notre Dame. One of Sullivan's focuses is, uncoincidentally, the philosophical problems concerning time. Browne was inspired to use *The*

Little Prince as inspiration after hearing Sullivan rehearse a verse from it, but perhaps Sullivan's work as a whole became a muse to Browne.

Relation to Literary and Fashion History

As explained above, Browne is no stranger to using literary influences in his work, and his decision to incorporate such influences makes sense given his personal history and journey to becoming a designer. It is important to acknowledge the implication that repeated usage of literary influence has for the high fashion industry. While many designers use fashion shows for storytelling, Browne brings viewers back to their childhood with the incorporation of fairy tales and childrens' books. In early 2022, Browne incorporated 500 teddy bear into his show.

The deliberate use of childlike figures and stories is especially interesting when one considers the public figures that Browne has dressed, including Michelle Obama at the 2023 presidential inauguration and Katy Perry who sang at the 2021 presidential inauguration. The gravity of these events for American society and culture deeply contrasts fairytales and childrens' toys. Browne's ability to balance these two competing tones is remarkable and sends another message: one should not take themselves, high fashion, or even the gray suit, too seriously.

Conclusion

Admittedly, it is unclear how intentional the connection between *The Little Prince* and Thom Browne as a designer and fashion brand more broadly are. When speaking to students in a seminar class about Browne at Notre Dame, offered in spring 2023, Browne noted that reviews of his work are overly analytical and suggest more meaning than was intended. Therefore, many

of the connections drawn between the story and the show as explained above may be purely coincidental.

However, if one views these connections as merely a coincidence, they overlook another layer of beauty and meaning. The true value of fashion is that it is connected to every other aspect of society and culture and vice versa, including literature. Therefore, by acknowledging these connections, one can analyze not just a fashion show, but also glean lessons about life, human nature, and the world.

The decision to incorporate specific storylines or figures is a tribute to both the Thom Browne brand and Thom Browne as a designer. His work is refreshing and yet timeless, which of course makes Browne an iconic American figure himself.

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