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Ruth Ellis's Suit

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Abstract
On 10 April 1955 Ruth Ellis shot and killed her lover outside a north London pub. She was arrested on the spot and tried for murder in the Number One Court at the Old Bailey; her highly publicised trial was short, and the jury took just over twenty minutes to reach a guilty verdict. She was executed on 12 July 1955 and was the last woman to be hanged in England. This is an article about the suit that Ellis wore to her trial. It was a smart, fur-trimmed, tailored suit, which she wore with a white silk shirt and high-heeled black shoes. Her hair was freshly dyed, and her make-up was perfect; she intended to look her best for the Old Bailey. And yet, her biographies record that someone in the courtroom was heard to announce that she looked like "a typical West End tart". What can be learned from the disjuncture between Ellis's self-perception and the perception of the public? What can a suit tell us about gender, sex, and class in post-war Britain? Clothes weave in and out of Ellis's life story and the story of Britain after the war; they were necessary and desirable, part of a personal and national self-fashioning. There are no photographs of Ellis in her suit, so this article is also an exercise in historical imagination. By examining the written reports of her dress and appearance in newspaper articles and biographies, it is possible to access broader historical and cultural meanings concerning gender and class in post-war Britain and the significance of material things in the individual aspiration for social mobility.

Introduction

Yesterday the girl who sought the bright lights made her last appearance as a glamour girl. Her "stage" was the dock of the No. 1 court at the Old Bailey. And her act ended in a sentence—of death.

—Daily Mirror, 22 June 1955

Ruth Ellis was the last woman to be hanged in Britain. On 10 April 1955 she shot and killed her lover, David Blakely, outside a north London pub (fig. 1). She was arrested on the spot and tried for murder in the Number One Court at the Old Bailey. The highly publicised trial was short and her defence perfunctory, and the jury took just over twenty minutes to find her guilty. Ellis was hanged in Holloway Prison on 13 July 1955. She was twenty-eight years old.

Figure 1

Ruth Ellis and David Blakely at the Little Club in London, 1955. Digital image courtesy of Trinity Mirror / Mirrorpix / Alamy Stock Photo (all rights reserved).

This is an article about the suit that Ellis wore to her Old Bailey trial. It was a smart, black, fur-trimmed, tailored skirt suit, which she wore with a white silk shirt and high-heeled black shoes. Her hair was freshly dyed, and her make-up was perfect; she intended to look her glamorous best for her Old Bailey appearance. And yet, her biographies record that someone in the courtroom was heard to comment that she looked like "a typical West End tart".[1] What can be learned from this disjuncture between Ellis's self-perception and the view of the public? While the decorative arts have traditionally described the connoisseurial study of style and patronage, they take their place within an expanded field of historical visual studies when inflected by more recent methodologies drawn from design history, anthropology, and material culture.[2] This is the intellectual context for my reading of Ruth Ellis's suit, in which reflections on the details of one woman's dress and appearance become the prompt for a much broader consideration of gender, class, and social aspiration in post-war Britain.

There are no photographs of Ellis in her trial suit, but it was, and remains, part of the spectacle of femininity that was put on display and judged at the Old Bailey. Ellis's appearance on the day of her trial, and in the years leading up to it, was described in meticulous detail in newspaper reports and was then retold in her biographies and in histories of the murder. Through a reading

of the written discourse around her courtroom appearance and the broader semiotics of women's clothing in this period, it is thus possible to reconstruct the different meanings generated by the black suit as Ellis stepped into the dock of the Number One Court. This is an exercise in historical imagination: a method that is based in a critical engagement with archives and images but is also broader in scope and involves a creative imagining in excess of what can be seen in an image or distilled from a text. It reads the gaps and the spaces in between the historical evidence. Clothes punctuate key moments in Ellis's life and the press reports, biographies, films, and television series, and histories of crime and jurisprudence that retell her story.[3] Ellis's vanity and childhood interest in clothes have been treated as signs of her excessive desire for social mobility and portents of her later moral transgressions. Clothes defined her identity as a young woman working in the metropolitan leisure industries after the war and made manifest her transformation into a glamorous peroxide blonde. She was given evening dresses and a clothing allowance to work as a nightclub hostess, and it was even suggested that she had sex with a clothing wholesaler in exchange for dresses.[4] Within days of her execution it was reported that a waxwork had appeared in a chamber of horrors representing Ellis in an off-the-shoulder black evening dress and tulle stole. But the black suit represented the apogee of this preoccupation with Ruth Ellis's clothes; it was the focus of attention during her trial and, after her death, was even drawn into the web of conspiracy theories about Blakely's murder and Ellis's guilt. Clothes weave in and out of not only Ruth Ellis's life story but also the story of Britain after the war; they were necessary and desirable, part of a personal and national masquerade.[5]

Ordinary and Extraordinary

To get to the figure of Ruth Ellis in her black, fur-trimmed suit and the casual insult voiced in the public gallery, it is first necessary to rehearse something of her life story; highlighting, in this case, the role that clothes and appearance play in her personal history and subsequent notoriety. Ellis was born in North Wales in 1928. She came from a modest, working-class family; her father, Arthur Hornby, first worked as a musician on ocean liners; her mother, Elisabertha Goethals, was a Belgian refugee and, at the time she met Hornby, a single mother working in domestic service.

As Arthur Hornby's financial and social situation deteriorated, he became increasingly violent and abusive towards his wife and children. Ruth's sister, Muriel Jakubait, has claimed that she was raped by their father and that he also sexually abused Ruth.[6] Ellis experienced male violence throughout her life; her relationship with Blakely was also violent and abusive, and she was one of many women in the post-war period who endured male aggression in their relationships and bore its traces—the bruises and fractures—on their bodies.[7] What made Ruth Ellis infamous and turned her into a notorious femme fatale was the fact that she was herself driven to violence and was hanged for her crime.

Ellis was thirteen years old when war broke out and, like many other girls from poorer families in this period, she left school at fourteen with hardly any formal qualifications. In 1942, the social researcher Pearl Jephcott published the findings of a study she had carried out on the lives and aspirations of teenage girls living through the early years of the war. Options and prospects for girls in this situation were few: "Even the very typical factory girl of sixteen who has been earning money for two years may only have managed to acquire … limited possessions."[8] The girls in Jephcott's survey owned little: a brush and comb set, some magazines, a pot of face cream and some pieces of crockery. One girl commented: "My mother buys all my clothes".[9] Choices were extremely limited for young, under-educated, working-class women; glamour and

possessions belonged to the world of Saturday matinees and were the objects of dreams. Ruth Ellis wanted more than this, however, she wanted a better lifestyle and better clothes than the women in Jephcott's survey.

Ambition is commonly regarded as a good thing, but in women excess ambition is seen to lead to deviancy and immorality.[10] In an interview with a newspaper while Ellis was awaiting execution, her mother recalled:

> *Ruth hated us to be poor … she always liked clothes and she would borrow mine and dress up in them. She wasn't like my other children. She was so very ambitious for herself. She used to say "Mum, I'm going to make something of my life".*[11]

This comes so close to being acceptable, and yet every clause declares Ellis's deviation from the feminine norm. Who would not hate being poor? But Ruth is unlike the other children in this poor family—she is abnormally ambitious; she dresses up and performs another self, a somebody rather than an anybody. In the aftermath of the murder, newspapers scoured Ellis's early life for signs of the aberrance to follow. Rather than a simple desire to pull herself out of poverty and violence, her love of clothes, her vanity, and her ambition all suggested a moral waywardness that would inevitably end on the scaffold.

Having left school, Ellis spent her teenage war years living and working in London. She started working as a waitress in Lyon's Corner House and during her leisure time began to experience the sexual culture of wartime Britain at dances, bars, and clubs, and in "dives" where the American forces met up. It was in one of the American nightclubs that Ellis met a Canadian soldier called Clare Andrea McCallum; they had a relationship, and she became pregnant. This was the first of a number of pregnancies, births, abortions, and miscarriages that punctuated her life, as they did the lives of so many women in this period. McCallum asked Ellis to marry him but prevaricated until he was sent overseas and it was discovered that he had a wife and family in Canada. Ellis's son, Andre, was born in September 1944.

From waitressing, Ellis moved on to nude photographic modelling and hostessing in London's drinking clubs. This was a familiar progression for attractive young women in the metropolis—a modern harlot's progress, according to some of the newspapers. In one of a number of exposés, following Ellis's execution, of corruption in the metropolis, the mass circulation paper the *People* put it bluntly and in capital letters: "WHEN RUTH BECAME A CLUB HOSTESS SHE TOOK HER FIRST STEP ON THE ROAD THAT LED TO MURDER".[12] Modern, post-war Britain borrowed the morality and rhetoric of Victorian melodrama. While the locations and some of the dramatis personae had changed, the moral lesson had not: the fallen woman, identifiable by her dress and appearance, suffers the wages of sin, from which there is no escape.[13]

In many respects, hostessing was a rational choice for Ellis. The basic salary of a nightclub hostess at this time was significantly higher than those of the clerks and factory workers interviewed by Jephcott; and, in addition, there was commission on the alcohol and food that she persuaded customers to buy while in the club, along with free evening dresses and accommodation.[14] Moreover, the clubs also brought Ellis into contact with men of a higher social class than her own. Membership of the clubs varied according to cost and reputation but consisted generally of men of the middle classes, some of whom had served as officers in the armed forces. Demobbed men mingled with civilians, tradesmen, criminals and gangsters in the heterogeneous spaces of post-war pleasure, creating a heady mix of opportunity, sleaze, and ersatz glamour.

Ellis worked in the Court Club in Mayfair, which was owned by a racketeer called Morris Conley. Conley had progressed from rigging slot machines and property development to organising prostitution from his nightclubs. As the investigative journalist Duncan Webb declared: "Right in the centre of corruption in the West End of London stands the figure of Morris Conley. I hereby name him as Britain's biggest vice boss and the chief source of the tainted money that nourishes the evils of London night life".[15] Ellis had moved into the heart of London vice, and no tailored black suit could disguise the spectacle of sex; to the readers of the mass daily press she was, in the words of that memorable phrase, "a typical West End tart".

It was in the Court Club that she met George Ellis, a well-off, heavy-drinking, and violent man, who worked as a dentist. They married in 1950 and moved out of London to Southampton, where George had been offered a job. A female neighbour recalled that Ruth stood out from the rest of the village where they lived because of her glamorous appearance: "Everyone looked at her because of the way she was dressed … she looked very fashionable—a glamour girl … . She wore a lot of make-up and I seem to remember red nails".[16] The phrase "a glamour girl" defines Ellis within the discourse of femininity and desirability of the period; she is out of the ordinary because of her clothes and her style, her artfulness and artifice. It matters little whether the neighbour ever actually saw her nails: a "glamour girl" could only ever have red-painted nails. The etymology of "glamour" is an enchantment or spell; it then becomes more specialised, referring to magical beauty and, ultimately, to a particular form of physical attractiveness defined by Hollywood films in the 1930s, disseminated in magazines and practised by ordinary women, filmgoers, and readers—working-class women, mothers, daughters, and sisters. Glamour retained its association with artifice and performance, with a seductive aesthetic of surface embellishment and sheen: red nails and lips, metallic blonde hair, jewellery. As cultural historian Carol Dyhouse observes: "Glamour was often linked to a dream of transformation, a desire for something out of the ordinary, a form of aspiration, a fiction of becoming".[17]

The marriage lasted a year. George was drinking heavily and had become violent, and although she was pregnant again, Ruth left her husband. She returned to London, where her daughter, Georgina, was born in October 1951. Ellis at this stage had only a few years left to live, and they were shaped by her life in the clubs. It is also around this time, 1952–1953, after she returned to London to work, that she made the momentous decision to dye her hair platinum blonde.

Desire and Aspiration

Blonde was a critical element in Ellis's physical self-transformation, tapping into a visual language of post-war femininity that made her even more camera-ready. For Ellis, blonde was a perfectly reasonable choice, and she was not the only Englishwoman in her twenties in the 1950s who thought being blonde was the way to achieve her dreams. The actress Diana Dors (fig. 2) remembered a friend who:

> *sported natural platinum-blonde hair, whereas mine was merely mousey. Somewhere, in the recesses of the mind … was born the dream of becoming a blonde, alluring film star, a woman who enchanted men and lived a life of glamour and fame.*[18]

Figure 2

Carl Sutton, *Diana Dors, Picture Post*, 22 January 1955, 24–25 (Liverpool: Hulton Press Ltd, 1955). Digital image courtesy of IPC Magazines / Picture Post (all rights reserved).

Blonde was synonymous with Hollywood glamour, and advertisers played on women's dissatisfaction with their looks, and the gap between their self-image and the image of the female star, to sell goods. "Mousey" was a constant accusation thrust at women who resisted the incitement to have glowing, film-star locks.[19] As feminist critic Ros Coward has observed, adverts constantly rework female dissatisfaction as desire and play on "an anxiety rather than a pleasurable identification … a relation of narcissistic damage".[20] One of the leading hair dye companies in this period, Hiltone, advertised week after week in women's journals and film magazines; in February 1953, around the time Ellis dyed her hair, an advert in *Photoplay* asked its female readers: "Do you fret at your mirror, hoping against hope to see your hair suddenly sparkle and gleam? It will, if you use Hiltone" (fig. 3). Blonde was the first step towards a new glamorous beauty that was embodied in the figure of Marilyn Monroe. In 1953, with the release of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, Monroe was at the height of her success, and Hiltone secured the rights to use her image in their advertisements (fig. 4).[21] Blondes, advertising copy claimed, were more confident and successful, and more attractive to men. As one English actress testified:

> *Going blonde had an extraordinary and exciting effect on me … I was more vivacious. More alert mentally … I felt I had a new personality. Almost instinctively I walked with more of a wiggle … I've discovered a completely new ME since I changed from being mousey.*[22]

Figure 3

Advertisement for Hiltone Hair Dye, *Photoplay*, February 1953, inside cover (London: Samuel Stephen Ltd, 1953). Digital image courtesy of Samuel Stephen Ltd / Photoplay (all rights reserved).

Figure 4

Advertisement for Hiltone Hair Dye, *Photoplay*, August 1953, 7 (London: Samuel Stephen Ltd, 1953). Digital image courtesy of Samuel Stephen Ltd / Photoplay (all rights reserved).

Ruth Ellis did, however, not just go blonde: she became a peroxide blonde. Within the lexicon of blonde hair dye, peroxide blonde has a particular signification. Newspapers habitually referred to her as a "platinum blonde", differentiating her "bottle blonde" style from other, more natural shades.[23] Platinum blonde is achieved by using hydrogen peroxide, a bleach that strips the hair and creates a white blonde look. It is a harsh chemical process that requires constant upkeep to prevent dark roots from showing through. By the 1950s platinum was beginning to appear vulgar and artificial, and it was up to one of the most famous advertising campaigns of the 1950s to transform the haircolouring industry by simply posing the question "Does She … or Doesn't She?". Clairol blondes, it suggested, looked natural and respectable, and you could not tell whether they did, or they didn't. Ellis was not a Clairol blonde, however, and the problem with her look was that it was hard and unnatural. It was obvious that "she did", in all senses of the double entendre.[24]

Her sister, Muriel Jakubait, describes a physical transformation in Ellis at this time. She was now managing the Little Club, a drinking club owned by Morris Conley. She was earning good money and dressing well. The Little Club was in Knightsbridge; Ellis had a flat above the club that came with the job, and it is likely that she was buying some of her clothes at Harrods, which was directly opposite. Ellis was wearing ready-to-wear but expensive garments, at the top end of the market and certainly way beyond the means of the young women in Jephcott's survey. Jakubait recalls catching sight of Ellis during an unexpected visit: "[S]he was walking like a model, swinging as she walked and really confident … . She'd been totally transformed. She was thinner … she'd had her original auburn colour stripped and changed to platinum blonde. It was immaculately styled … I remember sweet rationing ended about that time and she'd brought

loads of sweets for the children … . From the time she started bleaching her hair her character changed. It was like two different people. Being blonde does that. It made her confident and more carefree. She looked beautiful … . [T]his was the time in 1953 that my sister became the Ruth Ellis whom two years later everybody would know, her photograph would be on every newspaper in the country."[25]

Jakubait associates Ellis's transformation with sweets and the end of rationing, and there is a certain sense to this. Her look, achieved through hard work and money, expresses abundance and commodification, a new kind of femininity that is at once glamorous and distasteful. The utility clothing scheme, introduced during wartime to conserve labour and materials, had ended in 1952; however, the discourse of fashion and morality and the suspicion of luxury and consumerism had not entirely disappeared.[26] By 1955, the year of Ellis's execution, Britain was beginning its uncertain economic transition from post-war austerity to a kind of affluence. Economic recovery was predicated on building consumption, with women as the foundation of this new economic model.

In an environment in which women's appearance was so highly commodified, blonde was over-determined and contested. It can hardly be surprising that Ellis wanted to get her hair freshly dyed for the Old Bailey. Mousey, the adverts told her, was bad, and dark roots even worse; she wanted to look glamorous and to feel confident, and little wonder that her defence counsel was troubled when they saw her on the day of her trial. The journalist Duncan Webb summed up the ambivalence of Ellis's appeal: "There could be no denying that she was attractive in a nightclub sort of way, but behind that tinsel-like beauty … I could not help discerning a certain hardness, a brittle sense of calculation".[27] Ellis's beauty, her sexual attractiveness, is part of her offence and seems to inspire hostility and a desire for retribution in the men who write about her. After visiting her shortly before her execution, George Rogers, a member of Parliament, observed: "Although she was much refined by the weeks of suffering, I thought that in normal conditions she was probably a hard, brassy blonde".[28]

In Britain in the early 1950s, women like Ruth Ellis were exhorted by advertising campaigns to seek perfection and condemned to endless dissatisfaction and anxiety. Ambition and desire for this generation of working-class women were so often articulated in terms of clothes and personal appearance, which were seen as indices of social mobility and success. Perhaps the most memorable articulation of this sartorial longing is that described by Carolyn Steedman in her account of her mother's desire for a New Look skirt. She recalls her mother's constantly thwarted or only ever partially satisfied desire: "the proliferation of consumer goods that marked the mid-1950s, were used by my mother to measure out her discontent: there existed a newly expanding and richly endowed material world in which she was denied a place".[29] For women, clothes seemed to offer a gateway to a world of stylish advantage; the rules of fashion could be learned from magazines and films, and social origins could be camouflaged and transcended by the cut of a coat or the length of a skirt. Success and pleasure were fleeting, however, as discontent reasserted itself in the minds and self-critical gazes of modern female consumers. Autobiographies of women who grew up in the 1950s are peppered with anecdotes about fashion and aspiration, about observing and absorbing the longing of their mothers. In *Bad Blood*, Lorna Sage describes her upbringing in North Wales and her visits with her mother to a clothes shop in town. Most of the items were second-hand classics, suits and coats, "genteel cast-offs" that represented a better life and wider horizons to Sage's frustrated mother. The shop owner, Mrs. Smith, had a seductive sales routine: "When [she] insisted on the quality of the cloth and the superiority of the cut, she was addressing my mother as a class casualty and a dreamer, someone

in danger of getting stuck in a council house at the kitchen sink, unless she had a good suit, or a really *dressy* dress".[30] This was the cultural capital of a good suit to women who came from less well-off, working-class backgrounds: it promised so much more than its material value; it offered "class" in every sense of the word.

Ellis built a carapace around herself. She worked on her dress and appearance, even her voice and mannerisms, in order to assume a new, more socially elevated identity. Perhaps, like Sage's mother, she was frightened of "getting stuck", or longed for the world of goods and clothes, like Carolyn Steedman's mother. The emotional anxiety of wanting more and the frustrated longings were not unique to Ellis, but were shared by many women in 1950s Britain.

Ruth Ellis met David Blakely at the Little Club while working as the manageress. Blakely came from a well-off, upper-middle-class family. Educated at a private school, he went on to the military academy at Sandhurst and an undistinguished service career. When Ellis met him, he was working as a racing driver and was part of a social crowd who mixed at the racing tracks and in London's drinking clubs. They had a turbulent and abusive relationship; within two weeks of meeting, Blakely had moved into Ellis's flat, and so began a cycle of commitment, betrayal, recrimination, and violence. Blakely's erratic behaviour made Ellis increasingly insecure and suspicious, leading to their separation and, almost inevitably, to the fatal shooting.

What seems to have struck everyone, including the press and judiciary, about their relationship was the class difference. In spite of Ellis's attempts to improve and reinvent herself, it was evident that they came from different social backgrounds, and this was understood as a major factor leading to the murder. Detective Chief Inspector Davies, who led the investigation, was quick to conclude: "The two people, Blakely and Ellis, are of completely different stations in life … . On meeting Blakely and realising that his class was very much above her own … it seems she was prepared to go to any lengths to keep him. Finding this impossible, she appears to have decided to wreak her vengeance upon him".[31] The press also highlighted their differences and Ellis's desperate and hopeless attempts to assume the manners of Blakely's class. The *Daily Mirror* drew the conclusion that "Ruth knew it was going to be difficult to become Mrs. Blakely. David, willing to have fun, still knew that to marry a girl from a drinking club would mean disgrace in the eyes of his family and friends". In the face of irreconcilable differences, Ellis "tried every trick she knew to marry him. French lessons for when she accompanies him to Le Mans" and an elocution course because "David thinks I've still got a bit of a Manchester accent".[32] It is important to acknowledge the significance of these apparently incidental observations, to imagine a world where social identity is of such anxious symbolic importance that it can be proposed as a motive for murder.

In certain respects, the signs of class difference were more significant in post-war Britain than they had ever been. In spite of, or because of, the levelling experiences of war and the social changes and universal benefits introduced by the welfare state, the nuances of class distinction seemed to become increasingly pressing. Ellis had the money to buy good clothes; she was glamorous and good looking. But even with increasing numbers of British people identifying as middle class and accessing new levels of consumption, authentic upper-class identity was a chimera and could not be bought or learned.[33] One slip, one error of vocabulary or deportment, threatened to unravel the masquerade and expose the interloper. Social mobility was a performance that involved dressing up, and looking and speaking in particular, approved ways; women were taught how to lose their regional accents, which were regarded as vulgar and common, and to adopt the preferred BBC southern pronunciation.

Whereas the *Daily Mirror* claims that Ellis took a speech course to get rid of a Manchester accent, her biographer, Robert Hancock, suggests that "she dropped her aitches". While these observations are not entirely compatible, they seem to be more concerned to expose the crack in Ellis's performance, the crucial detail that revealed her true identity, than to correctly determine her "natural" accent. Her sister offers a different version of the narrative: "She spoke well enough without needing elocution lessons. Even if she had a high-pitched voice it was still good".[34] It is possible, also, to imagine Ellis's voice and its affectations through a letter that she wrote to Blakely's mother after the murder. An impossible letter to write under any conditions, Ellis adopted a self-conscious and incorrect formality:

> *Dear Mrs Cook*
> *No dought [sic] these last few days have been a shock to you*
> *Please try to belive me, when I say, how deaply sorry I am to have caused you this unpleasantness*.[35]

"Unpleasantness"—a polite, awkward euphemism that reveals every particle of effort to sound and be right. There is, then, a real cruelty in the way that the press relishes her social failure. In an account of Ellis, "The Woman", the *Daily Mail* rehearses her attempts to improve herself: the glamorous transformation, the speech-training and deportment classes. The judgement is severe. It concludes: "every turn failed, for Blakely was still ashamed of her".[36]

What all of these accounts point to is that Ellis's makeover was imperfect; that in spite of the surface simulation, there was always the possibility of exposure, of the wrong word, the wrong gesture or the wrong expression that would result in embarrassment or humiliation among Blakely's upper-class friends. In her brilliant account of the post-war fashion journalist and editor Madge Garland, Lisa Cohen describes the way that Garland's manners at once camouflaged and displayed her class deficiency: "In response to this pressure, she produced a style that was at once correct and distinctive, that played on correctness and was something more than correct: a bold performance".[37] For me, this vividly evokes Ellis's experience as she struggled to maintain her masquerade and to negotiate her ambiguous social position. It is, at the same time, both brave and brittle, exciting and exhausting; and, as Cohen observes, there was much to gain and even more to lose.

A Black, Fur-Trimmed Suit

It may seem that we have deviated far from the black, fur-trimmed suit that Ellis wore at her trial, but it is necessary to situate Ellis in relation to post-war class, gender, and sexuality in order to understand what the suit meant to her and the values she may have invested in it. A good, tailored skirt suit was perhaps the easiest aspect of her performance, the one that needed least practice and rehearsal. As British fashion sought to re-establish itself internationally after the end of the war, it was the tailored suit that was seen to express a quintessential form of national style that could be exported throughout the world. Among British designers, Digby Morton was one of the leading London names, working with the classic suit in fabrics such as wool and tweed, in subtle, low-key colours (figs. 5 and 6). As *Picture Post* fashion editor Marjorie Beckett stated: "No one tailors quite as well as we do … even Paris acknowledges that we are unequalled".[38] The tailored skirt suit was a particularly restrained and timeless creation that perfectly reflected the self-effacing beauty of British women while also advertising the social and income groups to which the wearer belonged. Seasonal change was articulated through small, nuanced details of pleating, folding and wrapping rather than bold, high-fashion statements: "hence the reputation

of London couture for beautifully tailored coats and suits, for 'wearable' rather than 'dramatic' clothes".[39]

Figure 5

Picture Post, 17 September 1949, cover (Liverpool: Hulton Press Ltd, 1949). Digital image courtesy of IPC Magazines / Picture Post (all rights reserved).

Figure 6

Marjorie Beckett, "The World's Best Suits", *Picture Post*, 17 September 1949, 40–41 (Liverpool: Hulton Press Ltd, 1949). Photograph by Nancy Sandys Walker. Digital image courtesy of IPC Magazines / Picture Post (all rights reserved).

The upper-class elegance of the made-to-measure tailored suit was also marketed in ready-to-wear ranges, sold in department stores and mid-range clothing shops to women who wanted to buy into the timeless chic of the skirt suit, at prices that still conveyed good taste but were more suited to post-war incomes.[40] The well-designed ready-to-wear tailored suit was resilient and versatile; equally at home at the racetrack (fig. 7), in a London club, or a courtroom, it conveyed a classy elegance, with a certain edge. There is a *Picture Post* fashion spread from 1952 devoted to London fashion; models are photographed in a range of smart and tailored outfits in traditionally male settings—a wine cellar, the Albany Club, a boxing ring (fig. 8). They are elegant and aloof and pay little attention to the men in the images; they strike mannequin poses and are there to be pored over and desired by men and women alike. The shot in Mr. Bloom's Boxing Academy is particularly striking, with its contrast between the classic, formal attitudes of the models and the poses of the semi-clothed boxers; upper-class femininity is juxtaposed with working-class pugilism. These women are timelessly elegant but also, just a little bit, sexy.

Figure 7

Advertisement for Driway Monarch Weathercoats, *Picture Post*, 15 October 1955, 40 (Liverpool: Hulton Press Ltd, 1955). Digital image courtesy of IPC Magazines / Picture Post (all rights reserved).

Figure 8

'London—Smart Girls in a Man's World', *Picture Post*, 20 September 1952, 22–23 (Liverpool: Hulton Press Ltd, 1952). Digital image courtesy of IPC Magazines / Picture Post (all rights reserved).

By the mid-1950s the image of the tailored skirt suit was shifting from a rural to an urban aesthetic. Retaining some of the moral values associated with austerity fashion, the ready-to-wear skirt suit conveyed elegance and restraint, good taste, and a sensual allure. It is not surprising, therefore, to find an illustrated article titled "The Tailored Clubwoman" in the 1953 *Guide to London Clubs* including the observation: "There was a time when [the tailored suit] meant a severe, rather masculine garment, useful undoubtedly, but often neither chic nor flattering. In this enlightened day and age, however, a tailored suit can be elegant, feminine, and eminently suitable for every occasion" (fig. 9).[41] The *Guide* was basically a directory of London night clubs and, just a few pages from the article on women's tailoring, it lists clubs in the SW1 area, including the Little Club, 37 Brompton Road, listed as a bar open on Sundays. This is Ruth Ellis's world: at the time of the *Guide*'s publication, she was manageress of the Little Club, with a salary that would make it possible to buy high-end, ready-to-wear suits at Harrods.

Figure 9

Joan L. Rothschild, “The Tailored Clubwoman”, in Anon., *The 1953 Guide to London Clubs*, (London: Regency Press, 1953) 60–61. Digital image courtesy of Regency Press (all rights reserved).

What happens when a platinum blonde wears a black tailored suit? How do the meanings of the suit and the woman shift and accommodate each other? One of Ellis’s biographies mentions that when she left her flat for the last time in order to kill Blakely, she left behind the book that she had been reading, a photo-novel of the film *Dead Reckoning* (directed by John Cromwell; USA, 1947), starring Humphrey Bogart and Lizbeth Scott (fig. 10).[42] The photo-novel offered a prose retelling of the movie’s narrative, illustrated with stills from the film; it was “a radically lowbrow, throwaway pulp subgenre”.[43] *Dead Reckoning* is a film noir, in which the hero/tough guy, played by Bogart, falls in love with “Dusty”, the girlfriend of his recently murdered best friend and army comrade. The plot is littered with deception and counter-deception focused on the figure of Dusty, a nightclub singer and suspected murderess. At the end of the film she shoots Bogart but sustains fatal injuries in a car crash. In the novel, and as played by Scott in the film, Dusty is “a tall, languorous blonde” (fig. 11); a classic femme fatale, duplicitous and deadly. In those Hollywood films of the 1940s and 1950s, now referred to as film noir, the femme fatale defines a particular kind of dangerous and fascinating femininity, a fatal temptress who is both destructive of masculinity and also inevitably the object of violent retribution.[44] Readers of the photo-novel would have seen in Dusty, the lounge singer and killer, beautifully dressed in suits and evening wear, a cold, hard style of seductive femininity.

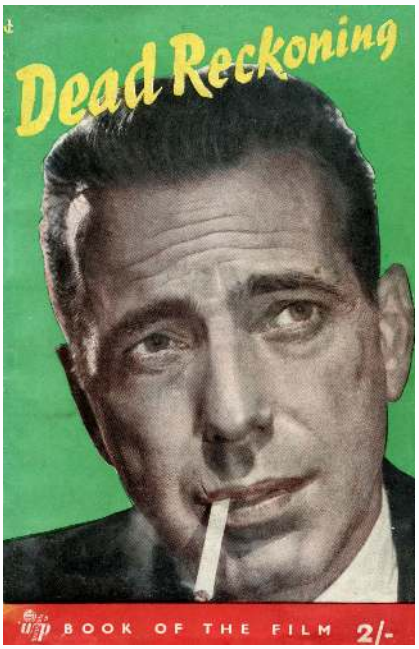


Figure 10

Alex Morrison, *Dead Reckoning: Book of the Film*, (London: Hollywood Publications, 1947), cover. Digital image courtesy of Hollywood Publications Ltd. Photo: Columbia Pictures (all rights reserved).

Figure 11

Dead Reckoning (still), reproduced in: Alex Morrison, *Dead Reckoning: Book of the Film* (London: Hollywood Publications, 1947), 1. Digital image courtesy of Hollywood Publications Ltd. Photo: Columbia Pictures (all rights reserved).

Perhaps the most stunning tailored blonde in the early 1950s was Marilyn Monroe in the 1953 noir thriller *Niagara* (directed by Henry Hathaway; USA, 1953) (fig. 12). Released in the same year as, but before, *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, the film is set at the Niagara Falls. Monroe is the unfaithful wife, Rose, who plots with her lover to murder her husband, George. The plan fails, and it is instead the lover who is killed; George strangles Rose and kills himself. In the scene where Rose is murdered by her husband, Monroe wears a tailored black skirt suit, with a low-cut white shirt and strappy sandals. The outfit is fitted and stylish; the jacket reveals and, at the same time, enfolds her body. The sexually expressive blonde inflects the meaning of the tailored suit. No longer just a sign of urban elegance and British tailoring, it is also the costume of the dangerous, sexualised woman who must be punished for her seductive beauty and provocative behaviour.

Figure 12

Marilyn Monroe in Niagara, (USA, 1953; dir. Henry Hathaway). Digital image courtesy of 20th Century Fox Film Corp. / Everett Collection Inc / Alamy Stock Photo (all rights reserved).

The black suit was thus not a simple or unambiguously decorous outfit for a court appearance. In *Witness for the Prosecution* (directed by Billy Wilder; USA, 1957), Marlene Dietrich plays a woman who is an accomplice to a murder carried out by her husband; she deliberately commits perjury at the Old Bailey, and when she is betrayed by him she stabs and kills him (fig. 13). For her appearance as a witness for the prosecution, Dietrich appears in a well-cut black suit, white shirt, and black beret, and until her husband's final, unexpected betrayal she is ruthless, in control and a liar. The black suit is a charade of elegant restraint; it may appear the embodiment of British moderation, but this disguises sexual power and aggression. In the 1950s, it is also the attire of the femme fatale, the "typical West End tart".

Figure 13

Marlene Dietrich in Witness for the Prosecution, (USA, 1957; dir. Billy Wilder). Digital image courtesy of MGM / APL Archive / Alamy Stock Photo (all rights reserved).

There is a passage in Oscar Wilde's novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, after Dorian has begun his pursuit of murderous sensuality, when his friend Lord Henry tells him: "You are the type of what the age is searching for, and what it is afraid it has found".[45] If Dorian Gray can be understood as the type of late-nineteenth century aestheticism and sensual gratification, the besuited peroxide blonde can be seen as the type of the post-war period, an embodiment of desire and consumerism, and a receptacle of the age's dreams of abundance and anxieties of decline and disorder. When Ruth Ellis entered the dock at the Old Bailey in her black, fur-trimmed, tailored suit, she represented so much more than herself: she was the type of the age and its nemesis.

Court Number One—the Old Bailey

From the moment Blakely's murder hit the newspapers, attention was focused on Ellis's appearance: her hair, her make-up, her clothes, her mannerisms. Readers of the *Daily Mail* were treated to a film noir version of the events: "Six revolver shots shattered the Easter Sunday calm of Hampstead and a beautiful platinum blonde stood with her back to the wall. In her hand was a revolver". And in its report on her committal trial at Hampstead Magistrates Court she was described as wearing "an off-white tweed suit with black velvet piping". Reporters were struck by her composure and lack of emotion; the *Daily Express* observed that she "showed the poise of a mannequin", although the *Daily Mail* noticed that at one critical point in the five-hour hearing she started "tapping her high-heeled shoes against the iron rails of the dock".[46]

The committal trial was merely a rehearsal for the far greater stage of the Old Bailey, for which Ellis wore a black tailored suit with astrakhan fur trim on the lapels and pockets.[47] Fur was fashionable in the early and mid-1950s; used as trim on tailoring, it was more affordable while maintaining its long-established associations with sensuality and luxury.[48] Clothes do not just

adorn and narrate lives; they are also given meaning by spaces and places. "Yesterday the girl who sought the bright lights made her last appearance as a glamour girl. Her 'stage' was the dock of the No. 1 court at the Old Bailey".[49] The words of the *Daily Mirror* have the ring of a finale, and in many respects this was the climax for Ellis; it was her moment of total visibility, and she had to look her very best. In her memoir, Ellis's daughter states:

> *Ruth Ellis, femme fatale, was ready for her first and only starring role, and she was not going to be seen as anything less glamorous than … any of the other blonde bombshells of her day. This was Ruth's big show, for which the rest of her life had only been a rehearsal.*[50]

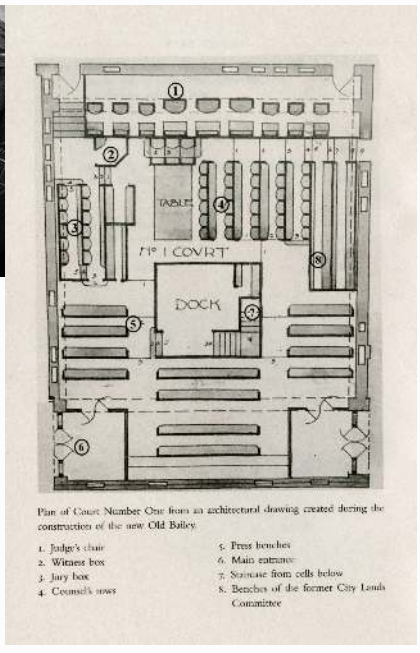
Court Number One is the largest of the four courts that lead off from the formal marble Grand Hall at the Old Bailey (fig. 14). Originally built in 1907, the Grand Hall had been restored after the war and reopened in 1952. To move from the entrance hall to the courtroom is to move from grandiose domes and marble walls and floors to a cramped, intimate space designed for ritualised legal drama. Court Number One is a small, enclosed, almost theatrical space, in which all the players in the drama—jury, defendant, judiciary, members of the public—are in close physical proximity (figs. 15 and 16).[51] Admission to the public area is by ticket only, and it was not unusual during the most notorious mid-century trials for long queues to form in the early hours of the morning and for touts to sell tickets at hugely inflated prices.[52] In the centre of the courtroom is the dock, a relatively large enclosure that contains the accused. As it is able to hold up to ten prisoners, a solitary defendant—a small blonde woman in a black tailored suit, for example—can appear isolated and alone. The defendant in the dock faces the judge; on the right of the dock are the benches of the prosecution and defence, and on the left the jury box. Between the jury box and the judge's bench is the pulpit-like wooden witness box; to enter the witness box, a witness has to walk through the well of the court and past the jury and, in plain sight of the gallery, climb the steps into the box. This is the setting for Ruth Ellis's appearance at her trial.

Figure 14

The Restored Interior of the Grand Hall of the Central Criminal Courts, September 1952. Digital image courtesy of Central Press / Stringer / Hulton Archive, Getty Images (all rights reserved).

Figure 15

Interior of a Courtroom at the Old Bailey, May 1981. Digital image courtesy of Varley / Mirrorpix / Getty Images (all rights reserved).



Plan of Court Number One from an architectural drawing created during the construction of the new Old Bailey.

1. Judge's chair
2. Witness box
3. Jury box
4. Counsel's rows
5. Press benches
6. Main entrance
7. Staircase from cells below
8. Benches of the former City Lands Committee

Figure 16

Plan of Court Number One from an Architectural Drawing Created During the Construction of the New Old Bailey, in Thomas Grant, *Court No. 1 The Old Bailey: The Trials and Scandals that Shocked Modern Britain* (London: John Murray, 2019) facing page, 1. Digital image courtesy of His Honour Judge Nicholas Hilliard, QC, the former Recorder of London and the City of London Corporation / John Murray (all rights reserved).

The defendant takes their place after the rest of the court is assembled, accessing the dock from a flight of stairs below the courtroom. Every report, along with counsel and witnesses, commented on Ellis's composure: at the time of the murder, during her arrest and committal, and at the trial itself. During his examination by the prosecution, the policeman who conducted the interview following her arrest observed: "I was most impressed by the fact that she seemed very composed … . There was no sign of confusion in her manner, or attitude … at all".[53] Even her defence drew the jury's attention to her self-possession in the courtroom, explaining: "You will observe that she is now a calm and undisturbed person'; at the time of the murder she was "driven to a frenzy which for the time being unseated her understanding that she committed the crime".[54] We might now describe Ellis's behaviour as detached or traumatised, but with Ellis showing few signs of emotion it was critically important that the defence should convince the jury that the killing was unpremeditated and the result of a complete loss of control.[55] Everything in Ellis's appearance, demeanour, and words in the court militated against this judgement, however. The woman in the dock did not appear a deranged, emotional victim; rather, she seemed like a cool, flawless blonde in a black, fur-trimmed suit.

In her study of women and British justice, Queen's Council Helena Kennedy has described that atmosphere in court when a defendant gives evidence: "Whenever a defendant walks from the dock to the witness box to give their own account there is always a strong sense of anticipation … especially in a murder trial".[56] Imagine this short walk from the dock of Court Number One, directly past the jury and in plain view of counsel and the public. Ruth Ellis: model, mannequin, mother, murderer. This judicial catwalk was where Ellis's suit and newly dyed hair would be most visible. Was there a sound as she descended from the dock and walked across the floor of the courtroom—any sound other than that of her high-heeled black shoes?

Ellis was a small woman and enjoyed wearing fashionable high-heeled shoes. Her sister recalls: "The children remember their Auntie Ruth with her clippety-clop shoes, her stilettos".[57] The heel of a stiletto tapers from the shoe to the tip; until the mid-1950s, when new materials and techniques were introduced in the construction of the shoe, stilettos were impractical and uncomfortable and required skill to wear with ease. The word "stiletto" derives from the Italian for dagger, and the style is a recurrent motif in crime films of the period. It was design historian, Viv Chadder, writes: "The pointed heel of deviance, delinquency and the modern woman".[58]

So Ellis would have made her way to the witness box, where she was asked by the prosecution: "Mrs. Ellis, when you fired the revolver at close range into the body of David Blakely, what did you intend to do?" She replied: "It is obvious that when I shot him I intended to kill him".[59] Her evidence was brief; the trial lasted a day and the jury took twenty-three minutes to find her guilty of murder. Ruth Ellis's suit was smart, fashionable, and elegant, but it could not disguise the ways in which her life transgressed the sexual and moral norms of the period. In his summing up of the case, the judge, Mr. Justice Havers, reminded the jury:

> *[T]his court is not a court of morals. You will not, therefore, allow your judgement to be swayed or your minds prejudiced in the least degree because, on her own admission, when Mrs. Ellis was a married woman she committed adultery, or because she was having two persons at different times as lovers. Dismiss these questions from your minds.*[60]

Of course, far from dismissing Ellis's moral identity, the judge firmly rooted it in the jury's heads. She was, he had confirmed, "a typical West End tart".

The fur-trimmed, tailored suit was an eloquent piece of clothing, expressing wealth, taste, and social prestige, but on Ellis's body it was the costume of the blonde femme fatale, the model and nightclub hostess, an identity that had been established in the newspapers in the weeks leading up to her trial. One symbolic component of the suit fails, but another assumes control. Not simply an image of restrained British haute couture, on Ellis the suit is the fitted, sexualised carapace of blonde noir.[61] Ellis is both ordinary and exceptional; in so many ways, her life mirrors those of other women in the late 1940s and 1950s, women who wanted more and who were persuaded by post-war consumer culture that adornment and display were the ways to get it. Sadly, she was also not the only woman in this period who was violently abused by their partner. She was, however, one of the few who fought back so fiercely, becoming an icon of post-war British modern femininity: self-promotional, consuming, ambitious, aggressive, sexually desiring, socially mobile.

Ellis was hanged on Wednesday, 13 July 1955. While there were those who continued to justify capital punishment, public opinion began to shift away from support of the death penalty. There seemed, to many contemporaries, something particularly gruesome surrounding the execution of a woman, and particularly a young, good-looking woman.[62] The execution of Ruth Ellis proved to be a turning point in the history of capital punishment in Great Britain; in 1957 the Homicide Act introduced the defence of diminished responsibility and limited the death penalty to certain

types of murder. The Death Penalty (Abolition) Act 1965 abolished capital punishment for an initial period of five years, and in 1969 it was abolished permanently.
In the end, there remains a life frozen in a face: frozen both at the moment when the image was taken and on 13 July 1955, when Ellis was hanged (fig. 17). Critics have celebrated the iconic female faces of the twentieth century—Garbo, Monroe. Ellis's face is the negative side of those beautiful masks, the face of blonde noir, of the femme fatale whose beauty disguises evil and transgression. Following her arrest, Ellis always seemed to be composed; it bothered the police and the judiciary, and it was reported by the press. They wanted her to break down, for her face and body to decompose and to express emotion and remorse, for the masquerade to shatter. But instead she dyed her hair, put on her smartest clothes, and carried on performing murderous violence re-presented as "unpleasantness".

Figure 17

Ruth Ellis and David Blakely at the Little Club in London (detail), 1955. Digital image courtesy of Trinity Mirror / Mirrorpix / Alamy Stock Photo (all rights reserved).

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About the author

Lynda Nead is Pevsner Professor of History of Art at Birkbeck, University of London. She has published widely on a range of art historical subjects and particularly on the history of British visual culture in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Her most recent book is *The Tiger in the Smoke: Art and Culture in Post-War Britain* (Published for the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art by Yale University Press). She has a number of advisory roles in national art museums and galleries and is a Trustee of the Holburne Museum and of Campaign for the Arts. She is currently writing a book called *British Blonde: Women, Desire and the Image in Post-War Britain*.

Footnotes

1. This is reported in Laurence Marks and Tony Van Den Bergh, *Ruth Ellis: A Case of Diminished Responsibility?* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, [1977] 1990), 134, 148; also, Anette Ballinger, 'Dead Woman Walking: Executed Women in England and Wales, 1900–1955', PhD thesis, University of Sheffield, 1977, 2.
2. My first degree was in the History of the Decorative Arts, combined with History of Art, at the University of Leeds and Leeds City Art Galleries.
3. For film and television see, for example, *Dance with a Stranger*, directed by Mike Newell (UK, 1985); *The Ruth Ellis Story*, directed by Chris Goddard (United Kingdom: Thames Television, 1977); *Ruth Ellis: A Life for a Life*, directed by Farren Blackburn (United Kingdom: BBC, 1999); *The Ruth Ellis Files: A Very British Crime Story*, directed by Gillian Pachter (United Kingdom: Wall to Wall Media, 2018). Biographies and other publications will be cited throughout.
4. See Robert Hancock, *Ruth Ellis: The Last Woman to be Hanged* (London: George Weidenfeld and Nicolson, [1963] 1989), 23–24.
5. I use the term "masquerade" here to refer to a particular form, or mask, of exaggerated femininity and national self-fabrication. In recent decades a number of feminist critics have taken the publication of Joan Riviere's article "Womanliness as a Masquerade" in the *International Journal of Psycho-analysis* X (1929), 303–313, as the starting point for analysing cultural representations of women. I have found discussions in film studies particularly helpful; see, for example, Mary Ann Doane, "Film and the Masquerade: Theorising the Female Spectator", *Screen* 23, nos. 3–4 (1982), 74–88; Laura Mulvey, "Thoughts on Marilyn Monroe: Emblem and Allegory", *Screen* 58, no. 2 (2017): 202–209.
6. Muriel Jakubait, *Ruth Ellis: My Sister's Secret Life* (London: Constable and Robinson, 2005), 23. See also Carol Ann Lee, *A Fine Day for a Hanging: The Real Ruth Ellis Story* (Edinburgh: Mainstream, 2012), 38.
7. On the traces of bruises on Ellis's body and the acknowledgement of Blakely's violence at her trial, see Lynda Nead, "A Bruise, a Neck and a Little Finger: The Visual Archive of Ruth Ellis", in "Visual Archives of Sex", special issue, *Radical History Review*, forthcoming.
8. A.P. Jephcott, *Girls Growing Up* (London: Faber and Faber, [1942] 1944), 47.
9. Jephcott, *Girls Growing Up*, 36–37.
10. This association of excess social ambition and sexual deviancy was first established in Victorian discourses on female prostitution; see Lynda Nead, *Myths of Sexuality:*

Representations of Women in Victorian Britain (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), 168–175.

11. Interview given to Geoffrey Winn, "The Woman Who Wants to Die", *Sunday Dispatch*, 26 June 1955, as cited in Hancock, *Ruth Ellis*, 16.
12. Duncan Webb, "Corruption", *People*, 4 December 1955, 3.
13. For an excellent discussion of post-war Victorianism and the imagery of melodrama see Frank Mort*, Capital Affairs: London and the Making of the Permissive Society* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), esp. 15, 122–125, and 358.
14. On salaries of women working in offices and factories see A.P. Jephcott, *Rising Twenty: Notes on Some Ordinary Girls* (London: Faber and Faber, 1948), 119, 137. On Ellis's starting salary and terms of employment as a hostess see Ruth Ellis, "My Love and Hate by Ruth Ellis", *Woman's Sunday Mirror*, 26 June 1955, 7. See also Hancock, *Ruth Ellis*, 22.
15. Duncan Webb, "The Monster of Mayfair, Vice Boss Morris Conley", *People*, 11 December 1955, 3.
16. Mrs. Margaret Woodford, as cited in Jakubait, *Ruth Ellis*, 67–68.
17. Carol Dyhouse, *Glamour: Women, History, Feminism* (London: Zed Books, 2010), 3. Dyhouse's book is one of a large number of studies that are now referred to within the interdisciplinary field "glamour studies". See also Joseph Rosa, ed., *Glamour: Fashion, Industrial Design, Architecture* (New Haven: Yale University Press in association with San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 2004); Stephen Gundle, *Glamour: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Alice T. Friedman, *American Glamour and the Evolution of Modern Architecture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010). My interest in the larger book project, of which this research is a part, is in what happens to American glamour when it crosses the Atlantic and encounters the specific class and gender identities of post-war Britain.
18. Diana Dors, *Dors by Diana* (London: Macdonald Futura, 1981), 10.
19. "Sta-Blond" regularly sold its products in terms of keeping blonde hair lustrous and preventing it from darkening. See, for example, its advert in *Picture Post*, 31 May 1947, 5: "If your hair was once natural fair or blonde and is now mousy or brownish …"
20. Rosalind Coward, *Female Desire* (London: Paladin, 1984), 80.
21. *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, directed by Howard Hawks (USA, 1953). Monroe starred with Jane Russell in this film adaptation of Anita Loos's 1925 comic novel *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes: The Intimate Diary of a Professional Lady* (New York: Liveright, [1925] 2014). On the impact of American-style advertising in Britain in this period see Sean Nixon, *Hard Sell: Advertising, Affluence and Transatlantic Relations, c.1951–69* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013); also Victoria de Grazia, *Irresistible Empire: America's Advance Through Twentieth-Century Europe* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005).
22. Janette Scott discussing her look in *The Beauty Jungle*, directed by Val Guest (UK, 1964) in *Photoplay*, August 1964, 32, and September 1964, 52.
23. My thanks to Josh Wood for his insights into the history of hair dye. See Grant McCracken, *Big Hair: A Journey into the Transformation of Self* (London: Indigo, 1997), 81–96; Caroline Cox, *Good Hair Days: A History of British Hairstyling* (London: Quartet, 1999), 154–165, 216–217; Malcolm Gladwell, "True Colors: Hair Dye and the Hidden History of Postwar America", *New Yorker* (22 March 1999): 70–81.
24. On the Clairol advertising campaign see Shirley Polykoff, *Does She … Or Doesn't She? And How She Did It* (New York: Doubleday, 1975), 22–36.
25. Jakubait, *Ruth Ellis*, 114.

26. On austerity regulations for clothing see Geraldine Biddle-Perry, *Dressing for Austerity: Aspiration, Leisure and Fashion in Postwar Britain* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2017). Clothes rationing was in place between 1941 and 1949. On the precarious affluence of the 1950s more generally see Selina Todd, *The People: The Rise and Fall of the Working Class* (London: John Murray, 2014).
27. Duncan Webb, *Line Up for Crime* (London: Frederick Muller, 1955), 208–209.
28. As cited in Jonathan Goodman and Patrick Pringle, eds., *The Trial of Ruth Ellis* (Newton Abbot: David & Charles, 1974), 57.
29. Carolyn Steedman, *Landscape for A Good Woman* (London: Virago, [1986] 2005), 36; also Judy Giles, "Narratives of Gender, Class and Modernity in Women's Memories of Mid-Twentieth Century Britain", *Signs* 28, no. 1 (2002): 21–41.
30. Lorna Sage, *Bad Blood* (London: Fourth Estate, 2000), 159.
31. As cited in Goodman and Pringle, eds., *The Trial of Ruth Ellis*, 45.
32. Howard Johnson, "The Bright Lights Led Her to the Death Cell", *Daily Mirror*, 22 June 1955, 5.
33. On the Gallup poll that demonstrated that since 1945 increasing numbers of working-class people identified as middle class see Roy Lewis and Angus Maude, *The English Middle Classes* (London: Phoenix House, 1949), 18.
34. Johnson, "The Bright Lights", 5; Hancock, *Ruth Ellis*, 16; Jakubait, *Ruth Ellis*, 58. A short recording of Ellis's voice, consisting of audio clips from episode one of *The Ruth Ellis Story*, is available on YouTube: "Ruth Ellis Speaking", https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TaO3tMpkMEk; the quality is not good but perhaps adequate for listeners to draw their own conclusions.
35. The letter is reproduced, with a facsimile, in Goodman and Pringle, eds., *The Trial of Ruth Ellis*, 38.
36. Arthur Tietjen and Rodney Hallworth, "Ruth Ellis Jealousy Appeal?", *Daily Mail*, 22 June 1955, 7.
37. Lisa Cohen, *All We Know: Three Lives* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012), 201. With thanks to Lisa for engrossing Zoom calls on Garland and Ellis.
38. Marjorie Beckett, "The World's Best Suits", *Picture Post*, 17 September 1949, 40. See also Hardy Amies, *Just So Far* (London: Collins, 1954), 221. My thanks to Beatrice Behlen for sharing this reference with me.
39. Marjorie Beckett, "Paris Decides the Spring Look", *Picture Post*, 18 March 1950, 30–33; and "Fashion—It's A Man's World", *Picture Post*, 20 September 1952, 17–20. On style and national identity see Christopher Breward, Becky Conekin and Caroline Cox, eds., *The Englishness of English Dress* (Oxford: Berg, 2002); and particularly Edwina Ehrman, "Hardy Amies, Royal Dressmaker", 133–145. Much of this research was done during Covid lockdown in 2020, and I am incredibly grateful to Rebecca Arnold, Beatrice Behlen, and Christopher Breward for responding so quickly and generously to my emails.
40. On the continuation of austerity morality in post-war fashion and the association of the ready-to-wear suit with good taste see Biddle-Perry, *Dressing for Austerity*, 80, 124–125. On post-war, ready-to-wear see also Christopher Breward, "Fashion's Front and Back: 'Rag Trade' Cultures and Cultures of Consumption in Post-war London c.1945–1970", *London Journal* 31, no. 1 (2006): 15–40; and Liz Tregenza, "London Before It Swung: British Ready-to-Wear Under the Model House Group and Fashion Group 1946–1966" (MA diss., Royal College of Art, 2014). My thanks to Liz for sharing her dissertation with me. For an exciting recent

reading of the symbolism of the tailored suit see Shahidha Bari, *Dressed: The Secret Life of Clothes* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2019), 81–133.

41. Joan L. Rothschild, "The Tailored Clubwoman", in Anon., *The 1953 Guide to London Clubs* (London: Regency Press, 1953), 59. The Little Club is listed on pp. 37 and 48.
42. See Hancock, *Ruth Ellis*, 137. The book Ellis was reading may have been Alex Morrison, *Dead Reckoning: Book of the Film* (London: Hollywood Publications, 1947).
43. Jan Baetans, *The Film Photonovel: A Cultural History of Forgotten Adaptations* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2019), 2.
44. The literature on the figure of the femme fatale is extensive. The following collections of essays are particularly helpful: Joan Copjec, ed., *Shades of Noir: A Reader* (London, New York: Verso, 1993); E. Ann Kaplan, ed., *Women in Film Noir*, rev. ed. (London: British Film Institute, 1998).
45. Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891; Project Gutenberg, 1994) http://www.gutenberg.org/files/174/174-h/174-h.htm.
46. *Daily Mail*, 29 April 1955, 7, 1; *Daily Express*, 29 April 1955, 1; *Daily Mail*, 29 April 1955, 1. See also the *Daily Herald*, 29 April 1955, 7: "Ellis … twisted a white handkerchief and tapped her three-inch heel shoes". Also, the *Daily Mirror*, 21 April 1955, 1.
47. See, for example, *Daily Mirror*, 21 June 1955, 4: the details of her clothes are described in all the newspaper reports. Astrakhan is extracted from fetal or new-born sheep and has a distinctive tightly coiled pile.
48. On the symbolism of women and fur see Julia V. Emberley, *The Cultural Politics of Fur* (Ithaca: Cornell University, 1997).
49. Johnson, "The Bright Lights", 5.
50. Georgie Ellis (with Rod Taylor), *Ruth Ellis, My Mother: A Daughter's Memoir of the Last Women to be Hanged* (London: Smith Gryphon, 1995), 175.
51. For an excellent description of the physical space of the Number One Court see Thomas Grant, *Court No. 1 The Old Bailey: The Trials and Scandals That Shocked Modern Britain* (London: John Murray, 2019), 1–20, on which the following paragraph draws.
52. "CCC: Miscellaneous Books and Papers. Applications for press and visitor passes for notable cases. Ruth Ellis", CRIM 8/26, The National Archives.
53. Hancock, *Ruth Ellis*, 12.
54. Hancock, *Ruth Ellis*, 157.
55. The partial defence of "diminished responsibility" did not enter English law until the Homicide Act 1957, which was introduced, in part, as a response to Ellis's execution.
56. Helena Kennedy, *Eve Was Framed: Women and British Justice* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1992), 195.
57. Jakubait, *Ruth Ellis*, 234, see also p. 67.
58. Viv Chadder, "The Higher Heel: Women and the Post-War British Crime Film". In Steve Chibnall and Robert Murphy, eds. *British Crime Cinema* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), 66. See also Lee Wright, "Objectifying Gender: The Stiletto Heel", in *Fashion Theory: A Reader*, 2nd ed., Malcolm Barnard, ed., (London: Routledge, 2007), 197–207; and Helen Persson, ed., *Shoes: Pleasure and Pain* (London: V&A Publishing, 2015), 161.
59. Goodman and Pringle, eds., *The Trial of Ruth Ellis*, 53.
60. Goodman and Pringle, eds., *The Trial of Ruth Ellis*, 115–116.
61. Leslie Boyd, chief clerk at the Old Bailey at the time of Ellis's trial, described her in his reminiscences as a femme fatale: "cold and calculating, an evil example of womanhood"; as

cited in Kennedy, *Eve Was Framed*, 256.

62. See, for example, Bernard O'Donnell, *Should Women Hang?* (London: W. H. Allen, 1956).

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