

Subordination

Veblen Unit

1.1 Reading

Thorstein Veblen was an American economist and sociologist who lived from 1857–1929, the year of the infamous US stock market crash. He is credited with helping to develop an economic perspective that shows how the science of economics is embedded in broader social and cultural concerns. Veblen argued that economics was an influential discipline, affecting everything from popular taste in fashion to deeply held beliefs about class, privilege, and work.

Veblen’s work, especially his classic and influential book of economic theory, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, is likely to be encountered in Economics and Sociology courses. First published in 1899, it is in this work that Veblen coins the now commonplace phrase, “Conspicuous Consumption.” This phrase describes the habit of acquiring material goods for the primary purpose of displaying them to others to assert one’s economic power and superiority.

The following passage is taken from the seventh chapter of this work, which focuses on fashion and clothing. Here, Veblen argues that fashion—the clothes that one chooses to buy and wear—is one of the most obvious sites of conspicuous consumption. The selected passage specifically argues that fashion has, in part, evolved in order demonstrate that the wearer of a particular article of clothing does not participate in manual labor, that he or she is wealthy enough to not work and to enjoy a carefree, easy lifestyle.

Style Note

Striving for clarity does not always mean writing short, simplistic sentences. Because Veblen is dealing with complicated ideas, he often uses subordination in his sentences to add additional content to main ideas. Some of his sentences are quite long, but they are easily understood through careful, attentive reading.

Reading Activity

Before reading the piece in its entirety, read the first sentence of each paragraph. Based on these topic sentences, predict what you think each paragraph will be about. Write a one sentence “guess” about each paragraph’s content. After you have read the whole piece and achieved a proper understanding (this may take several passes), see how well your predictions fit Veblen’s essay.

...Our dress, therefore, in order to serve its purpose effectually, should not only be expensive, but it should also make plain to all observers that the wearer is not engaged in any kind of productive labor. In the evolutionary process by which our system of dress has been elaborated into its present admirably perfect adaptation to its purpose, this subsidiary line of evidence has received due attention. A detailed examination of what passes in popular apprehension for elegant apparel will show that it is contrived at every point to convey the impression that the wearer does not habitually put forth any useful effort. It goes without saying that no apparel can be considered elegant, or even decent, if it shows the effect of manual labor on the part of the wearer, in the way of soil or wear. The pleasing effect of neat and spotless garments is chiefly, if not altogether, due to their carrying the suggestion of leisure-exemption from personal contact with industrial processes of any kind. Much of the charm that invests the patent-leather shoe, the stainless linen, the lustrous cylindrical hat, and the walking-stick, which

so greatly enhance the native dignity of a gentleman, comes of their pointedly suggesting that the wearer cannot when so attired bear a hand in any employment that is directly and immediately of any human use. Elegant dress serves its purpose of elegance not only in that it is expensive, but also because it is the insignia of leisure. It not only shows that the wearer is able to consume a relatively large value, but it argues at the same time that he consumes without producing.

The dress of women goes even farther than that of men in the way of demonstrating the wearer's abstinence from productive employment. It needs no argument to enforce the generalization that the more elegant styles of feminine bonnets go even farther towards making work impossible than does the man's high hat. The woman's shoe adds the so-called French heel to the evidence of enforced leisure afforded by its polish; because this high heel obviously makes any, even the simplest and most necessary manual work extremely difficult. The like is true even in a higher degree of the skirt and the rest of the drapery which characterizes woman's dress. The substantial reason for our tenacious attachment to the skirt is just this; it is expensive and it hampers the wearer at every turn and incapacitates her for all useful exertion. The like is true of the feminine custom of wearing the hair excessively long.

*But the woman's apparel not only goes beyond that of the modern man in the degree in which it argues exemption from labor; it also adds a peculiar and highly characteristic feature which differs in kind from anything habitually practiced by the men. This feature is the class of contrivances of which the corset is the typical example. The corset is, in economic theory, substantially a mutilation, undergone for the purpose of lowering the subject's vitality and rendering her permanently and obviously unfit for work. It is true, the corset **impairs** the personal attractions of the wearer, but the loss suffered on that score is offset by the gain in reputability which comes of her visibly increased expensiveness and infirmity. It may broadly be set down that the womanliness of woman's apparel resolves itself, in point of substantial fact, into the more effective hindrance to useful exertion offered by the garments peculiar to women. This difference between masculine and feminine apparel is here simply pointed out as a characteristic feature. The ground of its occurrence will be discussed presently.*

*So far, then, we have, as the great and dominant norm of dress, the broad principle of conspicuous waste. Subsidiary to this principle, and as a corollary under it, we get as a second norm the principle of conspicuous leisure. In dress construction this norm works out in the shape of divers contrivances going to show that the wearer does not and, as far as it may conveniently be shown, can not engage in productive labor. Beyond these two principles there is a third of scarcely less constraining force, which will occur to any one who reflects at all on the subject. Dress must not only be conspicuously expensive and inconvenient, it must at the same time be up to date. No explanation at all satisfactory has hitherto been offered of the phenomenon of changing fashions. The **imperative** requirement of dressing in the latest accredited manner, as well as the fact that this accredited fashion constantly changes from season to season, is sufficiently familiar to every one, but the theory of this flux and change has not been worked out. We may of course say, with perfect consistency and truthfulness, that this principle of novelty is another corollary under the law of conspicuous waste. Obviously, if each garment is permitted to serve for but a brief term, and if none of last season's apparel is carried over and made further use of during the present season, the wasteful expenditure on dress is greatly increased. This is good as far as it goes, but it is negative only. Pretty much all that this consideration warrants us in saying is that the norm of conspicuous waste exercises a controlling surveillance in all matters of dress, so that any change in the fashions must conform to the requirement of wastefulness; it leaves unanswered the question as to the motive for making and accepting a change in the prevailing styles, and it also fails to explain why conformity to a given style at a given time is so imperatively necessary as we know it to be.*

Reading Discussion Questions

1. According to the first sentence, what should be plain to all observers of one's clothing?
2. Paragraph 1 includes the idea that no apparel may be considered elegant if what is true about it?
3. Near the end of the first paragraph, Veblen suggests that elegant dress serves its purpose not only by being expensive, but because it is what?
4. In the final paragraph, Veblen suggests that a third principle of fashion should readily occur to whom?
5. What two conditions, according to the last paragraph, help ensure additional wasteful expenditure on clothing?
6. In conclusion, Veblen says that his discussion of fashion, thus far, has failed to explain what?

1.2 Writing

Writing Practice A

Fill in the following template with your own words. You need not keep with the original topic; in fact, you are encouraged to be creative in selecting a different one. Notice when you include information after the word “that,” you will be writing a subordinate clause (with a S+V relationship). Indeed, if done correctly, this exercise requires a considerable amount of writing.

But _____ not only goes beyond that of _____ in the degree in which it argues exemption from _____; it also adds a peculiar and highly characteristic feature which differs in kind from anything habitually practiced by _____. This feature is the class of contrivances of which the _____ is the typical example. The _____ is...substantially a _____, undergone for the purpose of _____ and rendering her permanently and obviously _____. It is true, the _____ impairs _____, but the loss suffered on that score is offset by the gain in _____.

Writing Practice B

Compose a two-paragraph summary that demonstrates the differences between your fashion sense and that of a good friend or relative. To make this work, be sure to choose someone whose fashion sense is clearly distinct from your own. As you compose your summary, consider what your fashion sense, and that of your friend or relative's, reveals about what we convey to others through our clothing.

NOTE: Be sure your summary is accurate. People who know you well should recognize and agree with your summation of how you dress. There should not be areas of dispute between what you say about your fashion sense, and that of your peer, and what others would observe.

Paragraph 1

My sense of fashion can best be summarized as _____. On most days, I can be seen wearing _____. My closet is full of _____ and _____, and I would never willingly wear _____. My preferred shoes are _____, as these compliment my overall style well.

ADD TWO MORE SENTENCES TO FINISH THIS PARAGRAPH.

Paragraph 2

On the other hand, my _____ fashion sense would be described as _____. S/he usually wears _____ and _____, and s/he would not be caught dead wearing _____. _____ favorite shoes are _____, which pair nicely with her/his _____.

ADD TWO MORE SENTENCES TO FINISH THIS PARAGRAPH.

1.3 Grammar

Subordination

One definition of subordination is to make something dependent upon something else. For our purposes, we need to notice how some word groups “depend” on others to make meaning and maintain grammatical correctness. Consider the following sentences:

Since I don't wear name brand clothing, I can afford an iPhone.

Lucy will purchase a new dress if Ricky allows her.

As I told the officer, I did not steal the purse but merely borrowed it.

The part of each sentence that makes sense on its own is called the main clause. The underlined portion of the sentence is called the subordinate clause because it does not make sense on its own; it is dependent upon the main clause. Remember, a clause, by definition, has a subject and a verb. This is true of main clauses as well as subordinate ones.

There are several types of subordinate clauses, but they all begin with words called subordinators. Familiarity with these words makes it easier to recognize and write properly-subordinated sentences.

whether	because	that	which	if	since
before	when	as	wherever	who	after

Preview the list of subordinators above, and then notice how Veblen makes use of many of them in his passage from above. Subordinate clauses are highlighted in yellow. Notice, though, how several subordinate clauses may occur together in a single sentence. In these cases, the second subordinator is highlighted in green.

...Our dress, therefore, in order to serve its purpose effectually, should not only be expensive, but it should also make plain to all observers that the wearer is not engaged in any kind of productive labor. In the evolutionary process by which our system of dress has been elaborated into its present admirably perfect adaptation to its purpose, this subsidiary line of evidence has received due attention. A detailed examination of what passes in popular apprehension for elegant apparel will show that it is contrived at every point to convey the impression that the wearer does not habitually put forth any useful effort. It goes without saying that no apparel can be considered elegant, or even decent, if it shows the effect of manual labor on the part of the wearer, in the way of soil or wear. The pleasing effect of neat and spotless garments is chiefly, if not altogether, due to their carrying the suggestion of leisure-exemption from personal contact with industrial processes of any kind. Much of the charm that invests the patent-leather shoe, the stainless linen, the lustrous cylindrical hat, and the walking-stick, which so greatly enhance the native dignity of a gentleman, comes of their pointedly suggesting that the wearer cannot when so attired bear a hand in any employment that is directly and immediately of any human use. Elegant dress serves its purpose of elegance not only in that it is expensive, but also because it is the insignia of leisure. It not only shows that the wearer is able to consume a relatively large value, but it argues at the same time that he consumes without producing.

The dress of women goes even farther than that of men in the way of demonstrating the wearer's abstinence from productive employment. It needs no argument to enforce the generalization that the more elegant styles of feminine bonnets go even farther towards making work impossible than does the man's high hat. The woman's shoe adds the so-called French heel to the evidence of enforced leisure afforded by its polish; because this high heel obviously makes any, even the simplest and most necessary manual work extremely difficult. The like is true even in a higher degree of the skirt and the rest of the drapery which characterizes woman's dress. The substantial reason for our tenacious attachment to the skirt is just this; it is expensive and it hampers the wearer at every turn and incapacitates her for all useful exertion. The like is true of the feminine custom of wearing the hair excessively long.

But the woman's apparel not only goes beyond that of the modern man in the degree in which it argues exemption from labor; it also adds a peculiar and highly characteristic feature which differs in kind from anything habitually practiced by the men. This feature is the class of contrivances of which the corset is the typical example. The corset is, in economic theory, substantially a mutilation, undergone for the purpose of lowering the subject's vitality and rendering her permanently and obviously unfit for work. It is true, the corset impairs the personal attractions of the wearer, but the loss suffered on that score is offset by the gain in reputability which comes of her visibly increased expensiveness and infirmity. It may broadly be set down that the womanliness of woman's apparel resolves itself, in point of substantial fact, into the more effective hindrance to useful exertion offered by the garments peculiar to women. This difference between masculine and feminine apparel is here simply pointed out as a characteristic feature. The ground of its occurrence will be discussed presently.

So far, then, we have, as the great and dominant norm of dress, the broad principle of conspicuous waste. Subsidiary to this principle, and as a corollary under it, we get as a second norm the principle of conspicuous leisure. In dress construction this norm works out in the shape of divers contrivances going to show that the wearer does not and, as far as it may conveniently be shown, can not engage in productive labor. Beyond these two principles there is a third of scarcely less constraining force, which will occur to any one who reflects at all on the subject. Dress must not only be conspicuously expensive and inconvenient, it must at the same time be up to date. No explanation at all satisfactory has hitherto been offered of the phenomenon of changing fashions. The imperative requirement of dressing in the latest accredited manner, as well as the fact that this accredited fashion constantly changes from season to season, is sufficiently familiar to every one, but the theory of this flux and change has not been worked out. We may of course say, with perfect consistency and truthfulness, that this principle of novelty is another corollary under the law of conspicuous waste. Obviously, if each garment is permitted to serve for but a brief term, and if none of last season's apparel is carried over and made further use of during the present season, the wasteful expenditure on dress is greatly increased. This is good as far as it goes, but it is negative only. Pretty much all that this consideration warrants us in saying is that the norm of conspicuous waste exercises a controlling surveillance in all matters of dress, so that any change in the fashions must conform to the requirement of wastefulness; it leaves unanswered the question as to the motive for making and accepting a change in the prevailing styles, and it also fails to explain why conformity to a given style at a given time is so imperatively necessary as we know it to be.

Exercise

Highlight the subordinate clauses in the passage below.

While Veblen suggests that some fashion, such as the corset and French heel, attest to a wearer's inability to work, some fashions were designed especially for work. Levi's blue jeans are one example that proves this point. Designed in 1873, one of the innovations of these pants was their rivets, which helped reinforce the pant seams at stress points caused by labor. While today most people who wear Levi's are certainly not hard-at-work gold-mining, as they were during the Gold Rush, the pants remain a popular choice as both casual and work wear. If this example of clothing designed specifically for work is not convincing,

Dickies brand clothing is another example. Because many employers require specific clothing for work, brands like Dickies have developed to fill these needs.

Grammar Practice A

Underline the subordinate clauses in each of the following sentences. For help, refer back to the list of common subordinators found earlier in this section (1.3). Some sentences may have more than one subordinate clause, and some may not have any.

1. While my favorite shoes used to be Doc Martin's, they are now my Rainbow flip-flops.
2. Although many clothing stores focus on upscale clientele with unlimited funds, stores such as H & M try to provide upscale styles at low costs.
3. Many designers make millions because they are able to use their brand name on a variety of accessories and apparel.
4. Fashion, when you really think about it, is hard to wrap your head around.
5. If you've never wondered why some jeans cost three times as much as others, you might start because many of the more expensive ones are actually identical in quality to the more affordable ones.
6. As Oscar Wilde remarked, "You can never be overdressed or overeducated."
7. Whenever I hear the phrase, "Just do it!" I feel like buying shoes.
8. The best book that I have read on the topic of fashion is by Dior.
9. As far as we know, people on other planets might actually dress like the Ropers from *Three's Company*.
10. Mr. Spock, who is an excellent rhetorician, has a very predictable sense of fashion—it never changes.

Grammar Practice B

Add main clauses to each of the subordinate clauses below to make logical, complete sentences. Vary the placement of the clauses you attach, and do not forget to capitalize and punctuate as needed.

1. while I was shopping at Tyler mall
2. because the man was not dressed for the club
3. if you think the Kardashians have good taste
4. which was 20% off
5. when the modeling agency called my cell phone
6. that sold last year for a lot of money
7. as his fedora blew off in the wind
8. since I was the only person with a Rolex
9. whenever she wears that old dress
10. after we shopped at K-Mart

Add subordinate clauses to each of the main clauses below. Do not use the same subordinator/dependent word more than once, and try placing your clauses before, after, and within the sentences.

1. Bozo the clown wore a lovely jumpsuit.
2. The vampire craze is making capes a fashion necessity.
3. Annie often wore men's ties.

4. The hipster has a closet full of t-shirts.
5. You can see the whole outfit.
6. Esmeralda always wore Prada sunglasses.
7. Her cheap perfume filled the air.
8. Betty's sailing outfit was by Ralph Lauren.
9. Jerry's tie pin was valuable.
10. Lately she seems to have lost her sense of fashion.

Write five original sentences that contain two subordinate clauses each. Underline all ten subordinate clauses.

