

Chanel and Her World Study Guide

Chanel and Her World by Edmonde Charles-Roux

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Plot Summary

Gabrielle "Coco" Chanel is an image of the dream every poor girl has of becoming a princess and living among all things beautiful. But even for all of her attaining wealth and artistic renown, Chanel lived forever pining for a love that would last a lifetime.

She was born to poor parents at the end of the nineteenth century, her mother dying when she was young and her father immediately abandoning her and her sister to an orphanage. She remained there until she went to a convent and then started working for a designer of women's intimate apparel. She dabbled in the theater and eventually met a wealthy man who would make her his mistress in Etienne Balsan.

She existed with several other beautiful but marginalized women in their demimonde, unwelcome in the high society their lovers occupied, but kept active and entertained among themselves and surrounded by horses. Another eventual lover, Boy Capel, shared her desire to work and earn a living, and gave her her own shop which allowed her to begin working as a milliner. Her success was immediate, and eventually she was able to buy her own shop and work emancipated from the men who had financed her.

Following her success with hats, Chanel began making dresses that became sought after by the finest women in Paris and eventually throughout Europe. She was the first designer willing to free women from the corsets and heavy dresses that kept them bound to conventional indoor living. Throughout her career, Chanel was able to live in close enough observation of the wealthy and active to know what their interests and activities were in order to put them in the clothes that most effectively freed them to enjoy sports, the beach, cars, and eventually even to join her in pursuing their own careers and be taken as seriously as men.

Over the course of her life, she was lover to illustrious men of several nationalities and interests but, tragically, the two men she loved the most and came closest to marrying died untimely deaths before they could be wed: Boy Capel in a car accident, and Paul Iribe to a heart attack during a tennis game. The result was that Chanel lived in fierce dedication to her craft, operating in her field flawlessly, and remaining its faithful servant throughout the whole of her life.

Forward

Forward Summary and Analysis

The first chapter offers a brief overview of the life of Gabrielle Chanel, allowing the reader to understand the world from which she came and thereby recognize the remarkable evolution by which she came to be the woman whose fame is still revered today.

Chanel was born in 1883 to a single woman in France, having been fathered by a poor traveling peddler. It is a beginning biographer Edmonde Charles-Roux takes care to explain she would strive her whole life to conceal. Having been abandoned by her father in the first week following her mother's death, all while she was still very young, Chanel was taken in by a provincial orphanage, and after that, a convent. For a girl of no means these were mercies, but Chanel had to escape. At eighteen, she ran away to work for a small shopkeeper in Moulins.

From there, a still lost and wandering Chanel tried to make a go of a life in the theater, but established no roots until she met Etienne Balsan at twenty-five. Balsan was a wealthy horse breeder and equestrian, and known to keep the most alluring and fashionable mistresses. Chanel began to see that she was to be next on that list.

Her style was always her own, however, and her internal vibrancy would make her memorable to everyone she met. Soon an equestrienne herself, Chanel applied her charms and style to the art of seduction, and became "the darling of all the young lions of the age". It was in this period that she met and became the mistress of the only man she would ever love: "Boy" Capel. It was a good pairing for her success as a businesswoman, but that period in her life left her aching to be chosen by a man who would love her above all others and for all her life.

It was, however, the financial help of Capel that allowed Chanel to open her first millinery shop and set her on the course from which nothing in the world could deter her for the rest of her life. War came within a year, and still, as if taking revenge upon life, Chanel worked and became a rival to the greatest couturiers of her age. Soon she earned the attentions of high-born aristocratic suitor the Grand Duke Dimitri of Russia, and later the Duke of Westminster, taking from each elements of style that would define the fashion of the eras that followed them. Among her most scandalous affairs was the discreet but still highly consequential affair she had with a German officer during the Second World War. The fallout from that scandal sent her into self-exile in Switzerland.

It would be a self-imposed competition with Christian Dior in 1954 that would draw her back to Paris. Working brilliantly but tyrannically, she made a lightning reappearance, and that style of working with ferocity and brilliance would define the rest of her life. She was a businesswoman to the core, but concealing a heart broken by a life left alone.

Strong enough to dominate an industry in business, in private she was vulnerable to the last.



Introduction

Introduction Summary and Analysis

Here Charles-Roux takes the reader back to Gabrielle Chanel's childhood home of Pontails in the Cevennes. Chanel's family was poor from generations back, having made their living gathering chestnuts from the groves throughout the Cevennes. Her great-grandfather was the first to give up day labor and put his wife's small dowry to use, renting a hall that would become the family bistro of Pontails. The plagues that swept into the area in 1850, however, would mean the collapse of the provincial village, and sent Chanel's grandfather to work as an itinerant peddler. His son would father Chanel and marry her mother three years later. Here Charles-Roux discusses the ways in which the decline of rural communities following the plague disrupted family life and so shaped the world in which Chanel would spend her childhood.

The style of the era in Saumur, the city in which Gabrielle Chanel was born on August 20, 1883, was set by its love of all things equestrian and the evolved style of the cavalymen. In August, the month of the Carrousel, quadrilles, reviews, presentation of the troops, and riding instructions were keeping the town out and about, and would set the scene for Gabrielle's birth.

The racetrack at Verrie also served as an important center of style in Saumur. The harshness of the dust and sun kept women dressed as they had been for decades, while the style of the men's dress was evolving quickly to accommodate better performance on a horse. Foulard caps and slender waists, high collars, and the freedom to move made the cavalymen the fashion-setters at the end of the century, while the women continued to look like haystacks.

In 1884, Gabrielle's parents finally wed, and Albert Chanel became official father to Gabrielle and her sister Julia. They were brought up in the public markets among festivals and huge family gatherings, while their father specialized in itinerant peddling of work clothes and undergarments.



Coco, a Kept Woman

Coco, a Kept Woman Summary and Analysis

Chanel's mother died in 1895 when Gabrielle was only twelve years old. A week after her death, her father left, and the fate of Gabrielle and Julia would be life in the region's largest orphanage. At eighteen, Chanel had to decide whether to go to the streets or to enter the novitiate at her orphanage, since those were the only options for girls at her age. She chose the novitiate, although she had little interest in religious life, and she was to conduct her life there in marked contrast to the girls who were there with the means to pay. She was there for two years with not a word from her father.

After those two years, however, Chanel was placed by the canonesses in a hosiery shop that was the height of elegance. During her employment there, she caught the attention of several of the gentlemen of the 10th Chasseurs. The regiment was for the smart sons of old, aristocratic families, and they made Chanel their favorite girl. It was from this group that Gabrielle chose Etienne Balsan and became a kept woman.

Seeking a direction and means to make a living of her own, Chanel debuted on stage at La Rotunde in Moulins. Admission was free and people paid only for drinks, so the girls made their living by passing a hat. Chanel's role was as a poseus, one of the girls whose job it was to add a note of elegance to the show by posing at tables at the back of the stage, and to sing simple songs between headliners. Chanel's first repertoire was made up of two songs, "Ko Ko Ri Ko" and "Qui qu-a vu Coco" and lent Coco Chanel her lifelong nickname.

Growing up close to Chanel and following a similar path was her aunt. The daughter of Coco's grandfather but the same age as Coco, the beautiful Adrienne Chanel was one of Coco's closest friends. Deemed to have too poor a voice to make a living in the concert halls, Gabrielle made the decision to become a mineral-water-dispenser in the Pump Room of the Grand Grill to make money to buy singing lessons. Her opportunity came without the need of singing lessons, in the form of Vichy operettas. Light and comedic, operettas were predecessors of the Broadway musical and favorites of the nouveau-riche.

With time, Gabrielle accepted that her fate would not be the stage, and she would have to accept the provinces and live in Paris. Photographs of the time show a Chanel already setting herself apart in fashion if she could not do so in any other way. She simplified her collars to simple folded down squares from the ruffles on the women all around her, and fashioned straw hats and bangs that would become timeless marks of fashion.

Adrienne, meanwhile, continues to conform and to put herself under the care of a woman who would guide her into the finest social circles. Through her connections and



social grace, Adrienne would be able to enter society confident of respectability. She did so with such success that soon she had three perfectly respectable admirers.

At the end of the nineteenth century, the motor was replacing the horse, and the flaws of the old-fashioned style of women's dress were starting to show. Dressed in long skirts, fragile hats, and narrow shoes, women could neither walk quickly, nor endure the open-air vehicles in their hats, nor even walk unaided. All of these conventions of dress served only to enhance the authority of men.

At twenty-five, Chanel agreed to live with Etienne Balsan, the man who would usher her into chateau life. One of the beauties who would be among the first of her friends was another mistress named Suzanne Orlandi, who shared such a similar background that the two spoke as little of it as Chanel would speak of her childhood throughout her life. Their demimonde, or half-world, at the chateaus were steps up, but still only half-worlds. They would not be welcomed or even acknowledged by the families of the men who shared their lives, and they were paid instead of married. The only way Chanel escaped the humiliation of the scorn of Balsan's family was by virtue of his having been orphaned.

She was preceded in Balsan's bed by Emilienne d'Alencon, courtesan and poet, and first met her at Balsan's chateau. Emilienne had an insatiable appetite for men and their fortunes, and even provided entertainment for a group of eight men from the Jockey Club on a regular basis before she lost interest in men and lived on her acquired fortune pursuing her poetry.

Chanel, meanwhile, now comfortably situated in the quiet sidelines of Balsan's life at the races, continued evolving her style, distinguished by white collars, neckties, and straw boaters. She began to mix elements of men's clothing and women's in order to make a wardrobe that would be functional at the muddy racetracks. While the other women were wearing their huge and fragile hats of old, Chanel's boaters were catching the eyes of Emilienne d'Alencon and Cecil Sorel, who were soon followed by Chanel's entire circle of friends. Another of her revolutionary ideas was to replace the corset with plain fitness, allowing for soft, unstructured dresses that allowed for comfort and motion. Her play with clothing even found room to play in the parties at Balsan's chateau. The group would put on plays that Chanel would costume. Here her experimentation with elements of men's clothing got even more play and reason for photographic documentation.

In culture around them, while they laughed and played far from the social requirements of stuffy old-fashioned Paris, tragedienne Sarah Bernhardt was at her zenith. On seeing her perform, Chanel described the best actress of her time as a nasal-voiced old clown. Her life in the demimonde was filled with fun-loving women who were willing to live an equestrian life and was orchestrated according to her whims. She ruled the chateau with her charm and style. She was full of graces, and one-of-a-kind in riding pants and flat shoes—elegance in reverse.



It was then that Boy Capel came on the scene. All of their friends noticed it. This Englishman of unusual ambition in a culture whose usual mode was to live decadently off of the old wealth of their families whilst doing no work, Arthur "Boy" Capel was falling in love with Chanel. Soon, despite his preferences, Balsan set Chanel up in Paris in her own millinery shop, since there was a bachelor's chambers he was not using in Paris that would serve the purpose. The foolishness in the move was that Capel lived just blocks away and was feeling neighborly. Soon Chanel's success combined with Capel's copious advice to drive Balsan positively mad at the prospect of not only his friend but also his lover taking work seriously. When he realized their love, Balsan continued to let her use the space in Paris but had to concede that the two had begun to live together.

Indeed, Capel was the only man Coco would ever profess to have loved, or to claim had been made for her. The two were very happy, to the point of inspiring playwright Paul Morand to base his *Lewis et Irene* on their affair. Chanel had finally found a man who could both interest and teach her, and who would take her aspirations beyond mediocrity seriously enough to help her make them a reality. Her hats were an instant sensation, and that could not be denied. To complete the transfer from Balsan to Capel, there had only to be a place secured for her to carry on her business. Balsan agreed with gentlemanly French wit and style, and Capel gave her the money to purchase a place of her own.

The place was the one on the same street that would become associated with her name for the next half a century: number 21 on Rue Cambon. She knew nothing of the subtleties of the trade known so well by both the women who came into her shop and the couturiers with whom they were accustomed to doing business. As a result, a looseness came to characterize her shop and fascinate onlookers, who were continually fascinated by the frequency of visits from a certain Boy Capel. When they stopped coming into the shop, unable to cope with such a simply-dressed girl being pursued by so many men, Capel had an English tailor remake an elegant version of the very simple lines she wore all the time. It was those clothes that would set the tone for the entire shop on Rue Cambon.

Among her first clients of repute was the actress Gabrielle Dorziat who, while costumed by Jacques Doucet, was hated by the young, almost unknown milliner Gabrielle Chanel, thanks to the willingness of old friend Jeanne Leary to show her the hats. Soon the rest of the ladies, all much photographed and setters of style who were friends at Balsan's chateau were wearing Chanel's hats. It was now time for Chanel to show her mettle as a dressmaker.

The fashion world in Paris at the time was dominated by three men: Charles Fredrick Worth who dressed Empress Eugenie, Jacques Doucet who began in lingerie, and Paul Poiret, whose love of the Orient gave the West its hobble skirt. Here Chanel's connections with fine and photographed women served her well, as she was able to hat old friend Suzanne d'Orlandi, then a renowned performer as well as Genevieve Vix, a ravishingly beautiful opera singer, and answer the question, "who dresses you?" with an unembarrassed "I do". Simultaneously, *le Mode* magazine was beginning to break way for fashion journalism, photographing women outdoors.



It was in this period that Chanel befriended and submitted herself to the tutelage of rule-breaking dancer Caryathis, a woman with a childhood very like Chanel's. The reader is also introduced to poet and eventual tumultuous lover of Chanel's and friend of Picasso's, Pierre Reverdy.



Gabrielle Chanel

Gabrielle Chanel Summary and Analysis

Following her fast-growing fame as a hat maker, Chanel turned her attention to the glaring impracticality of the fashions women were wearing to races, sporting events, and even the beach. She saw women dressed in the same restrictive clothing in contexts of sport and play that they wore for life in the city. Having found a bigger location and two young and very inexperienced assistants, Chanel opened a shop from which she would add skirts, sailor shirts, coats, and other revolutionary styles. She recruited her little sister Antoinette to follow Adrienne's example of wearing her fashions around town. This not only attracted scads of new business, but also helped her come to understand the value of the mannequin.

Another of her means of exposure was the unexpected respect of caricature artist Sem, who mocked the falsity of common fashion and by the same logic adored and revered that of Chanel. Her fame grew if only because she dared to be different from everyone else in an age when difference meant simplicity and comfort.

With increased respect from the press, Gabrielle continued to be a character to watch. She was famous merely for being different, and capitalized on her singularity to try things no one else was trying. Bathing suits, for example, are a notion conceived by Chanel at a moment in history when women were just beginning to brave the ocean in stockings and other variations of their formal dress, and so were in need of something that allowed more freedom of movement. Chanel's was made up of knee-length bloomers and a short-sleeved knee-length dress and from material taken from one of Boy's sweaters. Another of her innovative ideas was the suit made without the need for a corset under which the female form was merely suggested rather than caricatured. The comfort and mobility of this new style received enthusiastic reception from the women of Deauville, and gave her what would be her first major commercial success in the world of haute couture.

In Deauville, Chanel was witness to the end of the opulent nineteenth century, and being the same age of the new century, Chanel believed the people looked to her for sartorial expression. She accepted the challenge, and in 1914, when the Germans invaded France, Chanel dressed all of the wealthy whose homes and wardrobes had been destroyed. The numbers were great and wealthy, and Chanel was in the very place to which they fled in need of rebuilding their lost closets!

Meanwhile Boy, now in uniform, was befriending and closely watching a man named George Clemenceau, the President du Conceil. Unconventional and opinionated, Clemenceau visited the trenches dressed in a distinctive combination of finery and rumpled field clothes, and returned scathing criticism to the ministers for the lack of munitions he saw there. His visits and advocacy won him the votes of many of the men at arms. In addition, Boy's friendship with him played no small part in Boy's being



transferred from the Army to the Franco-English wartime coal commission. This would not only bring Boy back to London and Paris and far from the battle zone, but during the transition it would allow Boy to whisk Gabrielle away to Biarritz for a beach-loving, dancing retreat.

Biarritz was a retreat for the wealthy, and Boy and Chanel recognized the opportunity to repeat the success she had had the previous year at Deauville. Boy advanced the funds and Gabrielle designed a line of dresses priced at 3,000 francs each, establishing a success in Biarritz that would eventually become the charge of her little sister, Antoinette. This would be the shop from which the Spanish court, Madrid, San Sebastian, and Bilbao would be dressed. Her numbers grew to three hundred employees, with her back in Paris at the helm and mothers allowing their daughters to travel to Paris to be fitted by Chanel, even during a war! Soon, without even seeking his opinion on the matter, Chanel fully reimbursed Boy Capel for his investment.

With the men at war, women were the majority of the workforce and, just as it happened in America, they worked together to reinvent industry to be more ergonomically friendly and fairly scheduled. Also as in America, it was the men who benefited from their work, as on their return the women were promptly booted back into the kitchens. By then, however, the seed of independence had been planted. Women wanted liberation and knew they were capable of attaining it. Fashion would have to follow suit and supply women with the freedom to move and the style to be taken seriously. Following her aunt Adrienne's marrying her aristocratic lover after thirty years of waiting, Chanel revealed her first bout of liberated women's clothing. Debuting jersey knit, Chanel designed a suit as severe and lined as a man's, shortening the skirt, loosening the silhouette, and straightening the collar, which inspired women to change their paradigms and nostalgics to lament the end of opulence. Chanel was now a wild success, paying three hundred thousand francs in cash for the Villa Larralde in Paris for her business.

A Certain Misia Sert

Following her endorsements and groundbreaking modeling of short hair and a tanned face, Chanel lost her true love, Boy Capel, to an automobile accident. In a time of daring, particularly among those returning from war, Capel was lost to a blown-out tire on Christmas Eve in 1919 on his way from Paris to Cannes. It was his death that brought Chanel to the attention of Misia Godebska, who became determined to bring back Chanel's will to live following the crushing loss. Misia was a woman constantly in the company of artists; everyone was inspired by her and everyone was aware of her ability to destroy their hearts. She was not cultured herself but due to her husbands she was constantly in the company of all of the greats of the time: Renoir, Debussy, Oscar Wilde, Picasso, the designer Poiret, and the painter Voillard are among the most notable on the list. Chanel believed she clung to what she didn't understand, and that is why she loved Chanel so much. It was in her company that Chanel came to know so many of the great artists of her time.

One of those artists was the young and impassioned Raymond Radiguet, who published masterful poems in his early teens and a scandalizing novel at seventeen. He



died of typhoid at twenty, and it was Chanel who paid all of his hospital bills. His father having been killed at battle, he was an angry alcohol-loving child, but one Jean Cocteau still wished to allow to make his voice heard in the literary world. At the same time, Chanel was coming to know and admire Comte Etienne de Beaumont, a man whose tastes and expression of them gave rise to the new kind of snobbery that made conventional art commonplace and allowed new and inventive art to be seen and admired. It was this man who Chanel engaged to be the director of design for her upcoming line of jewelry.

Chanel in her Russian Period

The lover who followed Boy Capel would be the grand Duke Dimitri Pavlovich, eleven years younger than Coco, and who would usher Chanel into her Russian period. Chanel would find ways of incorporating furs and embroidery, and even recruited the skills of Dimitri's sister the Grand Duchess Marie to oversee the embroidery workshop. She and Dimitri shared a friendship of close identification, both having been raised without their mothers, in spite of the dichotomy of their classes as children. This was also the period in which Chanel chose the fifth of five formulas presented her by employee to the tsars, the chemist Ernest Beaux to become her signature scent, Chanel No 5. Vogue magazine praised her every move.

Following the Russian came the Greek, specifically in the form of costumes for an unconventional production of Antigone. Cocteau directed and Picasso did the set for this both widely acclaimed and widely criticized production, featuring masks clustered around a speaker instead of a chorus and red-painted men and white-painted women. By then Chanel was an international figure and the first couturier, male or female, to be welcomed by society. The key difference, as Chanel pointed out, was that she designed as a result of already being in society, and seeing what its lifestyle required. She found the fashions that served the lifestyle and thereby gave society just what it needed before it knew it needed it. She was celebrated as the designer of an era, singularly associated with the era she designed because, having no past, it is the only era she lived. Beach Pajamas, sleeveless sheath dresses, long strands of pearls, bobbed hair, and long exposed ankles were all thanks to Chanel.

Next on Chanel's list of experimental expressions was the costuming for Sergei Diagalev's "Blue Train", a dance operetta staged in 1924. For the production, Diagalev went to Darius Milhaud for the musical score, commissioned a scaled reproduction of a painting from Picasso for the forecurtain and also used Picasso drawings throughout the program, had his sets designed by Cubist sculptor Henri Laurens, and gave Chanel the job of costuming. She dressed the dancers just as they would if they were actually going to the beach, playing tennis, playing golf, or any of the other things the Blue Train in the south of France carried people away to do. Knit swimsuits, horizontally striped sweaters, and on the tennis player danced by choreographer Bronislava Nijinska, the headband made famous by the risk-taking tennis player Suzanne Lenglen. It was a revolutionary concept in theater, dance, and art and it only served to magnify the designing genius of Coco Chanel.



Black Magic

The Expo des Arts Decoratifs in Paris in 1925 kicked off both the Art Deco period of the 1920s and the black period for Chanel that would inspire her to introduce the little black dress. Peculiarly positioned at the same time was the increased fascination among white artists with negro culture in the form of music and physicality. It would be in this period that Vogue magazine would help acclimate the public to the mass-production of dresses by Chanel, calling them "Fords signed Chanel", indicating that quality was assured by having her name on the label. Paul Morand would become the major literary voice in expression of the era, and Chanel, similarly iconic of her time, would open the mirrored and elaborately staircased design house at 31 rue Cambon. Swimsuits moved away from the sweater material in which they were introduced, favoring lighter fabrics and slimmer silhouettes, and the commentators of fashion would finally start commenting in dismay over Chanel. Even her ardent Sem would lament the end of the curves of women and the depth and plain-ness of their tea-strainer hats. Also in this era, Suzanne Orlandi finally married the Baron Foy, and typified the Kodak-happy women of the demimondes who were, with the exception of their mirrors and their cameras, being forgotten as women of society. Paul Morand pointed out about this shift from the Belle Epoque that "the real snobs wear sweaters", describing the shift to all things modern and artistic and wanting nothing to do with the remnants of pre-war European culture or opulence.

Chanel's English Period

Chanel's English period was precipitated by her affair with Bend'or, the Duke of Westminster, and the time she spent at Eaton Hall and among his friends. It was autumn of 1925 when the two met in Monte Carlo following his divorce. He was the richest man in England, and made his elegance comfortable in a way that resonated with Chanel's philosophy perfectly. Completely different from Chanel in background and family, the Duke still lived a life very like that to which Chanel had so easily adapted at Royallieu with Balsan. It was in this period that Chanel befriended Vera Bate, a woman largely responsible for Chanel's introduction to English social circles, and a fellow adventurer in fashion, sharing Chanel's light-hearted willingness to commandeer elements from the Duke's own closet. It was also in this period that, while she was modeling women's clothes after the sharp suits the servers wore and the cardigans she had purloined from Bend'or's closet, she was pairing them with sumptuous jewelry including large brooches, jeweled bangles, and her signature long strands of pearls. In short, she continued constantly to strive to make simplicity appear remarkable.

Chanel and the theater

Returning to the theater and the works of Diaghilev in 1926, Chanel costumed the Jean Cocteau adaptation of Orpheus entitled Orphee with sweaters and pleated skirts to match the very modern set designed by Jean Hugo. In 1926 there followed another collaboration with Igor Stravinsky from the days of the Blue Train, and the production choreographed by George Balanchine entitled Apollon musagete. It was largely



considered Balanchine's greatest choreography, and brought Chanel back into Greek style with muses dressed in pleated and tied silk.

The year 1929 found Misia Sert fleeing a trial ménage à trois with her husband and his new young lover, so that this time it was Chanel nursing Misia back from a broken heart. The two went to Venice in search of Diaghilev, who was dying of advanced diabetes. The two women appeared to visit him all in white; so astonished was he at their beauty that they accompanied his body to its resting place dressed the same way. The theatrical collaborator who would take the place of Diaghilev was Jean Cocteau, the director of *Antigone*, and the man who would both determine and, like Chanel, would reflect the culture of Paris faithfully throughout their careers. His journalistic drawings of Chanel and her clothing were sought out by the most prestigious journals worldwide. The two collaborated next on the 1937 transformation of the Holy Grail myth for stage in *Knights of the Round Table*.

Next follows an explanation of Hollywood and Iribe, a man who would become Chanel's next love interest. Paul Iribarnegaray had been drawing fashions designed by Paul Poiret, and while his drawings were the truest to form and mood of anyone illustrating at the time, the scandalous lack of corsets in 1908 when it was released shocked mothers. From there, Iribe continued his life in search of luxury and true art until he married Vaudeville actress and silent film pioneer Jane Diris. There followed a marriage to an heiress, which led to a friendship with Cecil B. DeMille and the position of set designer for the film *Changing Husbands*, based on his own life. The set was as luxurious as he, and introduced the blending, even exchanging of fabrics for furniture and fabrics for clothing. The DeMille *Ten Commandments* followed and again Iribe's opulent style found expression. It wasn't until *The King of Kings* that Iribe's insistence on style, even at the expense of practicality, caused a conflict that got him sacked. For Iribe, it would be back to the decorative arts and his first love. Iribe and Poiret collaborated on the house design of a performing artist named Spinelly, making it as completely modern and in-the-moment as it could possibly have been.

Constantly commenting on Iribe and Chanel, as well as on their courtship, was the writer Colette. Next in the book is included a journal-entry of sorts that records Colette's impressions of Chanel at work. She describes her as thin and weary, but insistent on the obedience of the fabric and the submission of her angelic models. She describes the stern workings of her face and quick and nimble work of her long fingers, but all in a tone of distant distaste. The reader definitely ends her excerpt with the impression that Colette didn't much care for Chanel as a person; however, she might have admired her as an artist. As for the affair between Chanel and Iribe, Colette describes the social scene in which she encounters them as something saccharine and that she is continuously trying to escape, and calls Iribe a demon. Her writing is funny and engaging, but still filled with definite distaste for her subject matter.

Chanel's direct connection with Hollywood did not come from Iribe, however, but from Dimitri of Russia, of all people, who arranged an introduction with Sam Goldwyn. Goldwyn wanted to give women more reason to go to the movies, and seeing the very latest in fashion seemed just the attraction to get them there. His vision was to have



Chanel dress all of the Hollywood stars both on and off the screen. Chanel agreed to a \$1 million contract and a couple of trips to California each year. She endured only one trip, accompanied by the now solitary benefactor to the arts Misia Sert, only to find that the starlets with whom she met were not interested in having their style of dress dictated to them. She successfully dressed Gloria Swanson in *Tonight or Never* and then never returned to Hollywood.

Iribe did, however, launch Chanel into an exploration of real, rather than costume, jewelry. Costume having been her medium to this point, the 1932 show in which she displayed a whole line of real diamond jewelry was a major event. Breaking ground for women again, this time presuming to work with real gems, Chanel introduced another first: jewelry that could convert to bracelets, necklaces, even headbands, with just a few attachments or subtractions.

How to make use of le beau monde

In 1928, Chanel sent an architect back to the orphanage at Aubazine to acquaint him with the style in which she wanted what would be her first summer home built. She told friends it was modeled after a monastery where she spent "marvelous vacations" as a child, in order to explain its very spare and whitewashed appearance. Here Chanel entertained groups of society whom she would bring occasionally out of the world in order to bring her word of what was happening out in it. She recognized that society was not her birthright as it was there but, since those moving in those circles were who she was dressing, those were the people whose tastes and activities she had to make her concern.

Unisex fashion came to be at Chanel's command, as she dressed women in sailor's pants in jersey knit, and thus enabled the women of means, to whom sports were available to participate in, unencumbered by their dress. She adapted even the uniforms of painters and dockworkers to become high fashion for the wealthy at play. At Saint-Moritz, Chanel introduced matching hats and scarves that even the men adopted to ski in.

The following year marked the end of the Roaring Twenties and brought with it, as if on the wind, white satin. The thirties would be a time of economic plenty in Paris, and balls would be thrown with astounding frequency, even while America languished following Black Friday. And so, Parisian revelers and the fashion magazines that documented them would be silly with white satin. The photographers finally employed to replace the illustrators of old would place the white-frocked beauties in front of ethereal, dream-like backgrounds. Among the greats of the time included Edward Steichen for *Vogue* and *Vanity Fair* and Cecil Beaton, a man of the world who eventually designed the hats for Broadway's *My Fair Lady*.

In 1933, Iribe revived *Le Temoin* for the purpose of political commentary told amid his own illustrations on the fascist dictatorship under Hitler and the countries he believed were preparing to gang up on a beautiful and innocent France. To personify France, Iribe drew a beautiful and long, dark-haired woman very like Chanel herself. Soon after



these issues hit the streets and people began to understand the closeness of the tie between Iribe and Chanel, the two announced their engagement. The balls being thrown with such frequency all over Paris by this time included Chanel's name on the list of most coveted guest, and Chanel appeared in grand style at every one she could. She reveled in her revenge on a segment of society that made her rich but had never completely welcomed her until this glittering moment. Even while war came closer and closer, Parisians reveled until, at last, Iribe fell suddenly dead on the tennis court and Chanel entered a heartbroken solitude.

By 1936, the socialists had finally elected the man they wanted to lead Paris, and the workers' unions began to form. France was the last country to recognize the laborer's need for rest, the need for employment security, and to pay a uniformly fair and regular wage. To the horror of Chanel, even her own workers went to strike, barring her from entering her own design house. It was an affront during a time when she was still mourning the death of Iribe that she would long resent. It was only at the urging of her advisors that she acquiesced, and only then because of the very real risk of not being able to release an autumn collection. In that same year, workers with the newfound liberty of paid vacations hit the beaches of Deauville, to the horror of the wealthy who had heretofore had it as their own exclusive get-away, allowing them to escape the masses who were now descending upon them.

Chanel's last noteworthy move of 1936 was her discovery of Luchino Visconti, one of Italy's nobility, but with a love for literature none of his immediate connections understood in the least. Chanel arranged for him to watch Jean Renoir make a film, this one *The Lower Depths*, giving Visconti his first important connection and thereby his launch into show business. It was with the same director that Chanel costumed *The Rules of the Game*, a movie that got such scathing reviews for its pessimism about the wealthy in France that it inspired Renoir to move to America. Following that low spot, Chanel costumed *Oedipus Rex*, modernized for the stage by Jean Cocteau, and was beloved by the actors. Her mummy-like costumes, however, were considered by critics to be of rare indecency.

Mademoiselle Chanel

Mademoiselle Chanel Summary and Analysis

First coming to the fore in 1927 when Vogue called one of her designs "the sweater of the year", Roman designer Elsa Schiaparelli presented Chanel with her first serious challenge, one that lasted throughout the 1930s. Previously, Paris had its collection of designers each with her own happily sorted collection of clients, so there was no competition for anyone else's territory. Schiap, however, vied quite distinctively for the brand of woman to whom Chanel had always appealed, and the fashion press thrilled to the rivalry. Schiap was friends with Salvador Dali, and so became the fashion world's friend of the surrealist, while Chanel remained the friend of the cubist, and so they competed.

A part of the militia that Chanel accumulated to remain the dominant force in the world of fashion was a veritable court of photographers. Now in her fifties, Chanel was as refined in figure and face as ever and was at her most beautiful; her image was the best means she had of promoting her style to the world. Among the photographers who chronicled her beauty were Cecil Beaton and George Hoyningen-Huene. In this period, Chanel appeared at art events of every variety and was photographed in close conversation with the likes of painter Salvador Dali, theatrical designer Christian Berard, composer Igor Stravinsky, and dancer/choreographer Serge Lifar.

The last designs Chanel would release before the war was declared in 1939 was her 1938 gypsy-styled evening gowns. While Schiaparelli was focused on shocking pink, Vogue was raging about the very feminine shapes and vibrant colors in Chanel's designs. Being the last efforts of Chanel before the war, they remained a snapshot of the happiness of life in Europe's last moments of peace. On May 10, World War II came to France. Suffering its worst defeat in history, France was only relieved by the armistice, signed on June 21 of 1940, even while it refused Churchill's offer to be combined with England to create a stronger union.

Churchill turned out to be rather a significant figure in Chanel's life, having been a friend since her time with the Duke of Westminster in 1924. He remained the strength and the will of both England and France throughout the years of the war, and was very likely the man who kept Chanel's treatment light when she was arrested and detained only a few hours while other women in similar circumstances were shorn and walked naked through the streets. In 1940 and forty-one while France was occupied, every designer except Chanel, who closed her design house the moment war was declared, set their sights on elegance for functionality, and used the materials that were still available to them. Since the war, wool and silk were no longer available, but hats in particular remained as flamboyant as possible.

Following Chanel's short arrest, her resulting humiliation and fury inspired her to sequester herself to Switzerland where she would remain for the next fifteen years.



During one of several brief visits, American photographer for Harper's Bazaar Richard Avedon set a trap for Chanel she would never suspect, nor ever learn about as he did not publish it during her lifetime. She was photographed standing in front of a wall posted with one poster asking "Why Hitler?" and another quoting "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity" under the face of the French Republic and dated 1848. It was a telling contrast, and Chanel never suspected a thing.

In Chanel's absence, and in contrast to the conservative use of fabric and relatively unchanged styles over the course of the war, designer Christian Dior was allowed his major entrance onto the haute couture scene. He lengthened skirts back to the mid-calf from their previous length just below the knee, brought back the waist with starched wasp-waisted jackets accentuating the flare at the hips, and put in his skirts a fullness that shocked those still trying to maintain a respectful constraint in their use of fabrics. As many critics as Dior might have had, he had even more wildly supportive fans, dubbing his style the New Look for the womanly woman (*femme-femme*). If nothing else, Dior was renewing the pleasure of beauty with breathtakingly aloof models and relief from an era when everything was rationed. Even the minister of Economic Affairs, Sir Stafford Cripps, urged practicality and shorter, straighter skirts, but to no avail. Dior's sales were wild from the very beginning.

It was 1954, seven years after Dior's breaking on to the scene, when Chanel decided the time was right to bring the fashion world back to its senses and away from starched fabric and heavy, petticoated skirts. At more than seventy years old and having been away from the business for fifteen years, Chanel had assembled a staff and prepared a line with just a year of preparation. February 5 of 1954 would be its debut. Tensions high and the press assembled to be her jury, Chanel prepared her models at her studio at 31 Rue Cambon and released them to eagerly waiting eyes. The press watched in icy silence and their verdict was, almost unanimously, unimpressed. Melancholy, a fiasco, Chanel's return debut was not what she had hoped. But her vision was a good one, and she knew that the inevitable next thing was softer fabrics and clothes that would allow the modern liberated woman to live and move freely.

In American stores, even while owners panicked about what they were sure would be dismal sales, the customers delivered a completely different verdict. They bought up Chanel's dresses as faithfully as ever, while Chanel prepared, undeterred, for her next new collection. Life magazine, the most widely read in America, praised the elderly lady who, after such a long absence, so eloquently interpreted again what the women of the time wanted to be wearing. "Men were not meant to dress women", as Chanel was quoted to say, and to everyone's delight, Chanel was back in her role in full force as couturiere to the world.

The final chapter closes with a description of what life was like working with Chanel behind the scenes when she was preparing her stable of mannequins for a show. Her attention to detail was obsessive, keeping her and her models standing and posing, pinning and unpinning countless times until every line was right, and demanding that the room remain completely silent as long as she was working. It was only when she was completely satisfied that the mannequin was allowed to move, and Chanel to rest, drink,



and stand again for the next dress. When every mannequin was ready, embellishments such as jewelry were added, and then, the defile. The models were given numbers, and paraded without expression or show past the press without flowers or music. To Chanel, fashion was a craft, and should be allowed to speak for itself.

For the rest of Chanel's career, she would dress women in tailored but distinctively functional clothing, her drive coming as much from a desire for revenge as for a true and practical understanding of what women would look and move beautifully while wearing. Chanel wished to create a timeless style—not a fashion, since fashion changes, but style, which remains steadfast. Her apartment represented that philosophy very well, retaining many of the pieces of furniture that Jose-Maria Sert had helped her select in the very beginning of her success when she bought her first furniture. She kept rich pieces around her but for casual ornamentation and never rigid pragmatism, and she kept books immediately accessible in rebellion against the bibliophiles who kept their books locked away. She lived just above her design house at Rue Cambon, and her staff and mannequins came and went on the same stairs that she used every day. She was faithfully fond of her mannequins, and chose them as much for their personalities as their appearances. Chanel remained, however, even in spite of her proximity to them all, always, Mademoiselle.

It was 1970 when Katherine Hepburn, another feminine force of nature without equal in her own field, portrayed Chanel in a Broadway musical, a production done completely without consultation with Chanel, and without her even appearing at its opening night. Commenting on its success, she said, "Failed innovation is painful; revival of it is sinister".

The book closes with several Chanelisms believed to have been doctored by her poet friend Pierre Reverdy.



Characters

Gabrielle Chanel

Coco Chanel is the designer who first liberated women from corsets, heavy, restrictive dresses, and hats, and introduced into fashion the concept of clothing that serves a lifestyle of freedom of movement. Having entered the world of fashion from beneath it rather than in the midst of it, since she was born to peasants and raised in an orphanage, she was able to work from a perspective not steeped in the tradition of immobile, decorative women. Going from convent life to life as an assistant in a ladies' intimates store, she was able to meet Etienne Balsan, and through him enter the half-world, or demimonde, of the mistresses of the most illustrious men in Paris. There, through theatrical play and the freedom of activity that life among equestrians allowed, Chanel's style began to take shape. She began designing formally as a milliner, and when her hats were a success she introduced Paris to a simpler style. Using masculine elements for female dress (in the case of hats, the straw bowler), she was able to afford her entrance into haute couture. She designed for the finest French ladies, getting rid of their corsets and allowing their feminine shapes to reveal themselves under softer, more movable fabrics. She advocated an active lifestyle and a fit figure instead of stillness and clothes that forced the body into exaggerated shapes.

In her personal life, Chanel was rarely without a man to share her life with and to expose her to cultures and activities that she would not have been able to enter on her own, but she never found a love that would last her a lifetime. Both of her two dearest loves, Boy Capel and Paul Iribe, died before they could be wed, and so Chanel remained doggedly devoted to her work, and her renown for knowing just what women wanted and when they wanted it grew throughout her career.

She was also able to live a life closely connected to the most impressive artists of her generation. Early in her life it was women in the theater, and then she began to do costumes for world-class stage productions. As her life progressed, romantic connections with Russian and English nobility opened connections to the chemist who would design Chanel No. 5, the perfume that helped build her empire, as well as to the likes of Winston Churchill, who would save her from horrible treatment at the hands of the Nazis. She also maintained friendships with Misia Sert, a woman closely connected to poets, dancers, and painters, poet Paul Reverdy, painter Pablo Picasso, composer Igor Stravinsky, and theatrical director Jean Cocteau, among dozens of other illustrious names.

In the end of her life, following a decade-long self-exile from war-worn France to Switzerland, Chanel returned to bring her name back to the fore against rising star Christian Dior. Her reign quickly reestablished itself, and she remained Mademoiselle for the rest of her long and well-respected life.



Albert Chanel

Chanel's father became an important figure in Chanel's life almost entirely by virtue of his absence. Albert wasn't married to Chanel's mother until a year after Chanel's birth, having lived with her for three years before he proposed. Gabrielle was raised until the age of twelve in his lifestyle, in the open-air markets and festivals of Issoire, while her father evolved into a sort of traveling salesman dealing in work clothes and undergarments. At the age of twelve Chanel lost her mother, and her father promptly sent Gabrielle and Antoinette to the region's largest orphanage. That abandonment shaped the rest of her upbringing, to be sure, but Chanel was already, one has to conclude, profoundly shaped by the childhood she had had with her parents. It certainly cannot be ignored that Chanel made an art and a life out of making simple clothes—work clothes in many cases—into haute couture. It must also be remembered that Chanel was careful never to call fashion an art, nor to treat it as such, but called it a craft and took it very seriously.

Another undeniable footprint left on Chanel's heart by her father makes itself known in her lifelong search for a man who would love her above all others and stay with her for the rest of her life. She wanted the kind of unconditional, prioritizing love that her father would not give her, even as much as she wanted independence. The men she sought independence from were the ones who didn't need her or didn't seem likely to love her forever. The ones she opened her heart to completely, Boy Capel and Paul Iribe, were men who loved and respected her enough to have eyes only for her. Even in his absence, Albert Chanel remained a life-shaping force in Chanel's world.

Antoinette Chanel

Antoinette was Chanel's younger sister and was given control of the Chanel shop in Biarritz when Chanel started dressing the Spanish court and others from upper class Spain.

Etienne Balsan

Balsan was Chanel's first lover, a lover of horses and alone enough in the world that Chanel was able to live more openly with Etienne than the other women in the demimonde whose lovers' families didn't approve. It was Balsan who provided the first suite on rue Cambon for Chanel to open a shop.

Boy Capel

Arthur "Boy" Capel was the first man Chanel loved, and the first to believe in Chanel's talent enough to offer the financial help to get her started. Boy died in a tragic car accident.



Suzanne d'Orlandi

Suzanne was another of the women from the demimonde, and one of Chanel's closest friends. She was in love with Baron Foy, and remained his secret lover until they married when Suzanne was almost forty years old, remarkable for woman in her circumstance.

Emilienne d'Alencon

A courtesan and poet, Emilienne was the woman who was with Balsan before Chanel. She was a socialite and setter of fashion.

Sarah Bernhardt

Madame Sarah was a tragedienne who was admired as an excellent actress, but whom Chanel called an old clown with a pinched voice.

Gabrielle Dorziat

Gabrielle was another of the women from the demimonde, and became a Vaudeville actress. Chanel did her hats for her production of Bel Ami when demimondienne Jeane Lery brought her hats to try on.

Genevieve Vix

An opera singer also among the first to wear Chanel's hats on stage.

Caryathis

Another woman who started from very poor beginnings, Caryathis made her name performing eurythmic dance, often in very little clothing. Chanel took eurythmic classes from her in 1912.

Pierre Reverdy

A poet and passionate student and lover of his era and the art it produced, he remained a close friend of the cubists, such as Picasso, Gris, Modigliani and, of course, Chanel.



Sem

A caricaturist who spent much of his career mocking fashion and society, but who took a liking to Chanel for her bucking of tradition, and who became a significant ally in Chanel's early years.

Rodier

The fabric designer who originated jersey knit for some of Chanel's early dress designs.

Misia Sert

Misia was muse to several painters and poets of her era. She appears in several Vuillard paintings and became the face for Le Revue Blanche. She was the woman who kept Chanel's head above water when Boy died, and accompanied Chanel following her own relationship's end to see Diaghalev before he died.

Raymond Radiguet

A young and tormented poet, Radiguet was a child of World War I, and while very talented, he drank excessively and died of a poorly treated typhoid infection.

Sergei Diaghalev

Director of Blue Train and long-time friend of Chanel. Chanel and Misia Sert would be among his last visitors when he was dying of diabetes, and Chanel would finance his funeral.

Grand Duke Dimitri Pavlovitch

Dimitri and Chanel were lovers beginning in 1917, and their time together had a significant impact on Chanel's designs of the era. Furs as well as coats and peasant-inspired tunics came from this era.

Ernest Beaux

Once a chemist for the tsar of Russia, Beaux was the designer of several perfume samples, the fifth of which Chanel named her Chanel No. 5.



Pablo Picasso

Picasso was a part of the group of artists in Paris of which Chanel was a part, and was a bit ostracized by the others for conforming as much as he did to domestic, materialistic life when he married Olga Khoklova and started wearing things like gold watches.

Jean Cocteau

Jean was a theatrical director who both affected and represented Parisian culture on a scale similar to that of Chanel's. He directed several of the plays for which Chanel designed the costumes.

Bronislava Nijinska

Nijinska was the Polish choreographer who set Blue Train, the dance operetta that featured so many of Chanel's sport styles, to dance.

Henri Laurens

Laurens was the cubist sculptor who designed the set for Blue Train.

Josephine Baker

The model and American performer who inspired much of the look of the 1920s, including short slicked-back hair for women.

Bend'or, Duke of Westminster

Bend'or was Chanel's love interest starting in 1925, and was another significant influence on Chanel's designs of the era. Sailor-inspired styles, and well as cardigans, tweeds mixed with feminine fabrics, and server-inspired jackets were all results of their time together.

Vera Bate

Sarah Arkwright was the given name for this friend of Chanel's, largely responsible for Chanel's introductions into English society. Vera was also a friend who shared Chanel's love for raiding the Duke's closets for clothes.



Paul Morand

A playwright, inspired by Boy and Chanel for his play Lewis et Irene, and a Bugatti lover.

Paul Iribe

The only man to whom Chanel would ever be engaged, Iribe was a political writer, using Chanel's face to symbolize France in his *Le Temion*. He originated the idea of Chanel jewelry with real gems, and tragically died on the tennis court.

Colette

Colette was a writer who provided a description of Chanel, as well as Iribe and Misia Sert, with both a keen understanding and a bit of distaste.

Gloria Swanson

The Hollywood actress who bristled to having Chanel dictate her style. She wore Chanel for *Tonight or Never*, the movie that marked the end of Chanel's direct connection with Hollywood.

Sam Goldwyn

The Hollywood tsar who had the idea of dressing all of the Hollywood starlets in Chanel. He gave Chanel \$1 million for what amounted to a failed experiment.

Etienne de Beaumont

Frequent entertainer and fellow skier with Chanel at Saint-Morritz, where she introduced matching hats and scarves.

Marchese della Cerda

A Sicilian who designed remarkable jewelry for Chanel.

Cecil Beaton

A photographer for *Vogue* in the thirties and the era of white satin.



Conde Nast

Owner of Vogue and Vanity Fair.

Elsa Schiaparelli

A Roman designer who put up a respectable contest for Chanel in the years just before World War II and the temporary closing of Chanel's design house.

Serge Lifar

Choreographer and dancer for Ballet Russes and later Les Ballets de Monte-Carlo.

Salvador Dali

The surrealist painter from whom Schiaparelli drew inspiration. Also a frequent fellow guest at social events in Paris.

Winston Churchill

English Prime minister during the Second World War, and enough of an ally to Chanel to possibly have been of help when she was arrested in Paris.

Christian Dior

The designer Chanel wanted to defeat badly enough to come out of her Swiss exile and return to Paris and design.

Adrienne Chanel

Gabrielle's aunt was the same age as Chanel and her lifelong friend. Adrienne was among the very first of Chanel's close friends to model her hats and clothing on the streets of Paris in order to promote the Chanel name. Adrienne closely followed Chanel's early path, but apprenticed herself to a woman who was able to get her into society. She was in love with a man for thirty years before they married.



Objects/Places

The Cevennes

The region in France where Chanel was born; a provincial area full of peasants who had been poor for generations. Chanel's family was no different, and so Chanel would spend her whole life trying to distance herself from her connection with it. Her grandfather had a tavern that would later become a bistro and would disrupt family life significantly, providing a place for the men to gather instead of returning home to their families. Her father was an itinerant peddler, and abandoned Chanel and her little sister Antoinette when their mother died. As a result, Chanel and her sister were raised in an orphanage whose stark white would become a kind of beauty that haunted Chanel throughout her life. When she had her first summer home built, she sent the architect to study that very place and bring elements of it to her home. Provincial France was also celebrating all things military and equestrian during Chanel's childhood and could very well have been an influence on the designer's taste.

The Chateau Royallieu

Royallieu provided the setting for the demimonde to which Chanel was first introduced. On its grounds and in its grand chateau, the women who were not welcome among the families of the men they loved could enjoy a celebrated freedom. They rode horses, played at producing theatrical plays, read books, and enjoyed the society of people from within and without society, but who prioritized life to the fullest. It was the play in those years, and the freedom of time and resources there, that allowed Chanel to play with clothes, both from men's and women's closets, as well as from the boys' departments of stores, and to design and make her own clothes and hats. Balsan was a generous lover to Chanel and, albeit grudgingly, financed her beginning as a milliner. When Chanel started fashioning women's hats from men's straw bowlers and other hats with innovative shapes and dimensions, women she knew from that little world were among the first to wear them in public and on stage. It is also undoubtedly in large part due to the play and experimentation Chanel did with clothing there that started her imagination working in such a way that made her the excellent theatrical costumer she became. Indeed, much of Chanel's career could be viewed as a long cultivation and fruition of the experimentation she was allowed at the Chateau Royallieu.

Biarritz and Deauville

A retreat for the wealthy from all of Europe's cities, both Biarritz and Deauville became places where Chanel had access to wider populations of women of means. Biarritz gave her access to the Spanish court and enough demand that she opened a permanent shop there, leaving her younger sister Antoinette in charge. Deauville is where she encountered the wealthy dispossessed whose houses were casualties of World War I,



and were in need of someone to design all new wardrobes for them. Both of these places gave Chanel access to these populations at key moments in history, when people recognized that the world was changing to allow both for increased activity and to cast off the frippery and excess of the nineteenth century. For that reason, Chanel was presented a clientèle that was very receptive to her innovation.

Paris

The majority of Chanel's career took place in Paris, her design houses always being there on the rue Cambon. Culture was exploding there, in art, poetry, literature, theater, and fashion, so the people of Paris were continuously receptive to new creativity. Chanel was able to remain an observer of high society, first from a distance, and with increasing intimacy as she got older. As a result, she was continuously keenly aware of their pastimes and tastes. By dressing Paris, she was able to shape the taste of the whole world.

Rue Cambon

This Parisian street was the site of both her very first shop, from which she designed hats with Balsan's toleration and Capel's enthusiastic support, and her last, the mirrored design house from which she would command her empire.

The Theater

While there were several theatres, their affect on Chanel were very much the same. Attaching her name to the genius works of Diaghalev and Cocteau, Chanel both let her designs be seen by the world, as in the case of her sports wear and the Blue Train, and let her name be known to the very class of people she wanted to be dressing.

Hollywood

With Sam Goldwyn's enthusiastic invitation and generous compensation, Chanel went one time with Misia Sert with the goal of not only dressing Hollywood's new starlets, but also influencing their style off screen, as was Goldwyn's vision. It only took one visit for Chanel to conclude that Hollywood sorts were not the type of women with whom she wanted to be spending her career, nor did they take kindly to her trying it.

Eaton Hall

The idiosyncratic country home that had been trifled with by so many members of the nobility that it ceased making sense; it was also where Chanel and Bend'or spent much of their courtship in the 1930s. Watching the servers there, Chanel came away with new designs for suits that women ate up all over the world.



Rocquebrune

The location of the olive grove Chanel gifted herself for her summer home in 1928.

Switzerland

The place of Chanel's self-imposed exile from France during and following World War II. She was there from 1945-1954.

Chanel's Apartment at rue Cambon

In the same building as her design house, Chanel lived in apartments filled with the same furniture Misia's last husband had helped Chanel pick out when she finally had the means to furnish her world on her own. It was also filled with books she loved the proximity of, and shared a staircase with the women who worked in her studio. For that reason, her stable of mannequins and all of her closest assistants were very close at hand most all the time.



Themes

Humble Beginnings

While Chanel tried her whole life to keep her beginnings from becoming known to the world, they served to magnify the remarkable nature of her career. Having come from a family with no expectations nor offering any support, she followed a vision that was born exclusively inside herself. While her aunt Adrienne and her sister Antoinette were enthusiastic supporters, they followed Chanel on a path she blazed on her own.

She was also artful in her simultaneous entrance into and studying of society when artfulness played no observable part in her upbringing. She was content to stay outside society, at the racetrack with Balsan, and even at her summer home in her prime, and watch the women she dressed rather than presuming any place among them. While she was independently wealthy and regarded by all of society as a genius, she remained separated from it, aware that it was not her birthright as it was there. It wasn't until her fifties that she began to accept enthusiastic, unanimous and frequent invitations to the balls being thrown throughout Paris.

Chanel was also without the advantage of an example of a female entrepreneur when she started designing. All of her genius of timing, of scale, and of behavior when she was dealing with high society was the result of her keen observation and instinctive insight. She forged a path from hopeless dependence to celebrated independence without ever having seen any other woman do anything like it.

The Value of a Community of Artists

Throughout Chanel's adult life, starting the moment she left the abbey, Chanel was surrounded by people who had given their lives to some form of art. There were the singers when she was very young, each one trying to make a go of it in the theater. After that, the women of the demimonde, several of whom went on to be actresses and opera singers. Their lives together were filled with creativity, both in theatrical play and in their freedom to dress themselves as they liked, spending so much time on the Royallieu grounds where they could dress as they pleased. Once Chanel's career started in earnest, she was constantly dressing performers and socializing with artists of every category. With such intimate insight into what the creators of visual art, poetry, theater, and literature were thinking about, she was able to design in close rhythm with the evolution of the arts. She was also amid a group of people who would have encouraged risk-taking and innovation.

There was also the obvious advantage of the network to which friendship with artists gave Chanel access. Acquaintance with one artist would lead to an introduction to another. Many of her opportunities, her perfume as a prime example, came from introductions she would never have had without her having cultivated the friendships



she did. The costuming she did in the theater came from knowing who she knew. Her fashions were seen by communities of people on actresses and singers and so spread the Chanel name. As one introduction lead to another, Chanel was even eventually introduced to Winston Churchill, who became a friend and a significant ally. Chanel's entire life was a collection of illustrious friends who were able to both feed her soul and her creativity and further connect her to people who would strengthen her empire.

The Value of Feminine Friendships

While much of Chanel's path was determined by the men in her life, there are examples of women whom Chanel kept close throughout her life, and of other women who were friends for only a short time but to obvious mental and emotional advantage for her. Among her long-term friendships were her aunt Adrienne, her sister Antoinette, fellow demimondane Suzanne d'Orlandi, and socialite Misia Sert. Adrienne was Chanel's close companion in her early years of exploration and remained an ally throughout her establishing her career, becoming one of her willing and enthusiastic early models about town. Antoinette was an equally willing model, and later took charge of her sister's store in Biarritz when Gabrielle needed someone to manage it while she designed in Paris. Suzanne was a kindred spirit and close friend while Chanel was with Balsan, and remained a faithful supporter and model of her innovation throughout their lives. While Misia Sert came into Chanel's life later, she provides an example of someone who offered emotional support when Chanel was in need of it, nursing her back into life after Boy's death and receiving a similar kind of support from Chanel when she divorced Jose-Maria Sert after his affair.

Other women, like Vera Bate, Colette, Caryathis in her youth, and Jeane Lery at Royallieu, were friends while their worlds followed the same path, but didn't remain close over time. Still, in each case, they were valuable assets and supports. Vera was a jolly companion and valuable social connection while Chanel was with Bend'or. Colette was critical, but allowed an insight into Chanel while she worked that few others had access to. Caryathis inspired Chanel to dance and Chanel identified singularly with her poor beginnings. Jeane Lery introduced Chanel's hats to the woman who would put them on stage. Each of these women were only in Chanel's life for a small amount of time, but shaped Chanel and her course significantly.

Style

Perspective

Chanel's life story is told from the perspective of Edmonde Charles-Roux, a student of both her life and the industry. It is evident on every page that Charles-Roux viewed Chanel in the same way that the industry viewed her from the 1930s to the end of her career. Charles-Roux tells of Chanel's beginnings with compassion and gives credit to her at every turn for her innovation and singularity of style. Charles-Roux is also careful in setting up the historical context in which Chanel's life took shape, drawing attention to parallel lives taking place in the same time. Each life Charles-Roux describes intersects with Chanel's in some small way, but each one serves to clarify significantly the fashion of the time, the influences in culture that made a change in fashion make sense, and the ways the connections she made shaped her career.

Charles-Roux also communicates a clear understanding of what was happening politically as the world changed at the turn of the century and in the first five decades of the twentieth century. She was careful to provide the period following World War I, when the world was moving away from the opulence and impractical indulgence of the nineteenth century, as the context in which Chanel's corset-free designs were introduced. Later, when women were trying to enjoy life on the beach and enjoying the same motor transportation as their husbands, Charles-Roux also made sure to remind the reader of the very heavy skirts and tiny restrictive shoes women had been trying to do these things in before Chanel intervened.

Charles-Roux doesn't veil her admiration at all when she points out the insight Chanel continued to demonstrate in the end of her life when she came out of her seclusion in Switzerland, in seeing that women were not going to want to wear Christian Dior's tiny-waisted jackets and heavy skirts for long. Charles-Roux continues to express her admiration for Chanel's genius even as she describes the very rigorous demands she placed on everyone in her design house in the days leading up to a show. The perspective of an admirer is helpful when reading about a life such as Chanel's, since she was controversial from the very beginning, but a trail-blazing figure who was someone the world has never seen again. It seems to be the author's intent is to describe a singularly talented and fearless figure, and to inspire in the reader the same love and admiration she feels for her herself.

Tone

Both indulgence and admiration dominate the style of Charles-Roux's description of Chanel's life. In the moments when she was chasing dreams someone else might call foolish, like her singing and dancing in her youth, Charles-Roux remains indulgently understanding of a young woman trying to find her place. She is indulgent again when she describes Chanel's very risky costumes for theatrical productions like *Oedipus Rex*.



Costumes made of strips of fabric like mummy-dressings were things Charles-Roux merely described matter-of-factly and did not judge. Another excellent example of her indulgent affection for Chanel comes when she describes Chanel's tiny moment dressing Gloria Swanson for Sam Goldwyn's production of *Tonight or Never*. Chanel was so accustomed to having everyone she dressed hang on her every word and take her advice without question that when Swanson bristled at having her style dictated to her, Chanel dismissed the entire Hollywood proposal without ever looking back.

Charles-Roux's admiration for Chanel is the most observable tone throughout the book. She describes Chanel's dresses like they were each one a work of genius, and places them so carefully among descriptions of the very impractical parts of their dress that their practicality and insightful innovation cannot but be praised in the mind of the reader. She also describes the social world Chanel watched from a distance as a place she recognized not completely having earned her way into yet, and thereby acquaints the reader with the insight and constraint with which Chanel managed her social face while still remaining up-to-date with what the socialites would want to wear.

The result of these emotional facts in the author is that their inspiration is effectively passed on to the reader as facts of Chanel's existence. To know Chanel through the eyes of Edmonde Charles-Roux is to love and admire her.

Structure

The format of the book is very like a large fashion magazine dedicated to the life and times of a singular character. Large pictures keep the reader completely engrossed in the time period described, since the rapidity of the change in styles and lifestyles is as much a part of Chanel's story as she is. In addition, with every picture is included a long description of its applicability to what the main text is describing. The inclusion of pictures is a tremendous help to the reader in understanding the significance of Chanel's influence on the world around her. There are also included intermittently and as they apply to the story of Chanel's life small descriptions of other characters whose lives either affected Chanel's directly, or just affected the world around her significantly enough to warrant mention. They are helpful overall, but on occasion are an interruption to the reader's understanding of the flow of Chanel's timeline. Their helpfulness comes on as a reflection of Chanel's life in its historical context. It is hard, on reflection, to imagine how else those parallel stories might have been included, so once the reader understands the purpose they serve, it is easier to tolerate their presence.

At the end of the book is included the explanation of Karl Lagerfeld's taking up of the Chanel label after her death. Since she hadn't groomed a successor, her empire was without leadership and the reader, by that point, is definitely wondering what was to become of her life's work when her life ended. It is a nice way to conclude the telling of her story, and tastefully short. There is also included a collection of maxims attributed to Chanel along with the explanation that they could have been helped by Reverdy. They also serve as an insight the reader is hungry for. After a book of hearing about her life

from several other perspectives, to get some insight on her life from her own voice and perspective is a well-chosen addition.



Quotes

"Restrict yourself to giving me your memories. Let me know the real names, and prove to me that you have in no way tampered with your heroes." opening leaf

"Chanel lived at the very center of an extraordinary professional success; yet she suffered extreme loneliness, having failed in what meant the most to her — the life of a woman. What she had, however, was more independence, more freedom than most could ever imagine." forward, p. 9

"Fashion does not only exist in dresses; fashion is in the air, it is brought in by the wind, one feels it coming, breathes it in, it is in the sky and on the pavement, it depends on ideas, customs and happenings." forward, p. 11

"Crazy officers . . . with their foulard caps, slender waists. . . Meanwhile the women — with their overload of ornament — looked like haystacks." Introduction, p. 19

"The apprentice of the Rue de l'Horloge quickly became the toast of the young lieutenants. With Gabrielle's permission, these gallants made themselves her true discoverers." Chap. I, p. 29

"This was how Chanel made her debut at La Rotonde, with a repertoire consisting of two songs: "Ko Ko Ri Ko" and "Qui qu'a vu Coco". The audience then began calling her by the word that appeared in the refrain of both songs. Soon she became la petite Coco to all her friends at the garrison." Chap. I, p. 35

"Chanel was twenty-five when she agreed to live with Etienne Balsan, the man who would lead her out of the providential backwaters and into chateau life." Chap. I, p. 54

"In her obsessive fear of being taken for a cocotte, Gabrielle observed the proprieties to excess . . . coiffed in one of the straw boaters she made for herself and that enchanted her friends." Chap. I, p. 61

"It was a change of partners in the best tradition of French wit and style. With complete, natural ease, Capel simply took Balsan's place, at the same time that he advanced the funds necessary to purchase a business for Gabrielle." Chap. I, p. 86

"Capel said to me, 'Since it means so much to you, I will have an English tailor make elegant what you wear all the time.'" Chap. I, p. 88

"Reverdy later wrote, 'I pity those who, having lived through that marvelous period, failed to participate in it. . . I doubt there has ever been so much blue sky and sun in the entire history of art, or so much responsibility heroically assumed.'" Chap. I, p. 102

"'Chanel built her wardrobe in response to her needs, just the way Robinson Crusoe built his hut,' wrote Paul Morand in *L'Allure de Chanel*." Chap. II, p. 108



"In a characteristic move, Coco borrowed the material of Boy's sweaters, a technique she would often repeat in subsequent years, searching through the wardrobes of her lovers for elements of masculine attire." Chap. II, p. 120

"As Chanel would express it, 'A world was dying, while another was being born. I was there, an opportunity came forward, and I took it. I was the same age as the new century, and it was to me that it looked for sartorial expression.'" Chapter II, page 124

"With the death of Boy. . . it was Chanel's friends Jose-Maria and Misia Sert who undertook to restore her will to live. This brought Gabrielle into the circle of artists where Misia reigned. Now the couturiere gained the authority that allowed her, in subsequent years, to appreciate and defend talents that were as diverse as they were original." Chap. II, p. 170

"No. 5 was a mixture of 128 ingredients, blended by an eminent chemist, Ernest Beaux, whose father had been employed at the tsarist court." Chap. II, p. 184

"Stravinsky was very smitten with Chanel, who all her life would cherish the icon that he gave her on his arrival in her home, where, under commission from Diaghalev, he orchestrated the themes for the ballet Pulcinella." Chap. 2, p. 205

"She took advantage of everything that charmed her, whether at Eaton Hall or on the ducal yachts, and made these discoveries the dominant themes of her collections." Chap. II, p. 245

"1932-37: These were years in which Chanel's life was much affected by her lively friendship with Jean Cocteau and, on the creative level, by her own growing powers of invention." Chap. II, p. 258

"She is said to be very rich. Luckily, she remains unaffected by the contagious glitter of gold, the indiscreet glow exuded by weak souls overwhelmed with possessions." Chap. II, p. 272

"This was because the movie mogul wanted the French couturiere not only to costume the queens of Hollywood but also to reform their taste." Chap. II, p. 278

"I developed the habit, then unprecedented, of surrounding myself with people of quality so as to establish a link between myself and society." Chap. II, p. 287

"At age fifty-five, Gabrielle Chanel was in the prime of her beauty. Her features, like her figure, had reached their ultimate refinement." Chap. III, p. 330

"The day after Liberation, an implacable order from the highest places had, in one stroke, kept Chanel from being purged. . . It is thought, without absolute certainty, to have been the intervention of the Duke of Westminster with this friend Winston Churchill that made Chanel the beneficiary of the consideration known to no other person in those troubled days." Chap. III, p. 349



"Still, slowly, the conviction grew within Chanel that the time was approaching when women would be seized by a furious desire to throw off those waist cinchers, padded bras, heavy skirts, and stiffened jackets. Astonishingly, she even judged the right moment." Chap. III, p. 354

"All the while she remained resolutely indifferent to everything but the creative process, a process that slowly was leading toward perfection." Chap. III, p. 361

"She hated everything that, by reducing women to the status of objects, had for so long inhibited their ability to keep pace with men." Chap. III, p. 366

Topics for Discussion

Was it Chanel's time or her genius that allowed her to create such a revolution in the dress of women? If it was a combination of both, discuss how the two contributed to the fact.

How did Chanel's background contribute to her taste?

To what extent did Chanel's connection with such a wide variety of artists affect her career and her designs?

To what extent do you think Chanel's distance from society freed her to design for it?

Was it an advantage or a disadvantage to Chanel's work that she never married?

Do you think the mass-production of clothing was a benefit to fashion?

What is your opinion of the adaptation of men's clothing for use by women? Why was it such an appealing idea to Chanel?