

Clothes make the
man



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

In his “ rags to riches” story, *Ragged Dick* or, *Street Life in New York with the Boot Blacks*, by Horatio Alger, Jr., we are introduced to the character of Richard Hunter (known on the streets as Ragged Dick), a bootblack working in the rough streets of New York City in the late 1860s. Alger’s novel falls in the category of juvenile fiction, a “ story to teach”; this type of fiction helps with the mental state and development of young people and acts as a type of moral guidebook for young readers. This bildungsroman focuses on Ragged Dick’s emotional and psychological growth that paves the way for his later success. Although the plot is fairly simplistic and even in some ways predictable, one interesting aspect of the work is the reoccurring motif of clothing. Specifically Ragged Dick’s evolving characteristics and maturity can be directly tied to his change of clothing and appearance. His emotional and moral growth, as reflected by his attire, can be organized into three general stages: status quo (he is satisfied with his life as it is); epiphany (he is awakened to the possibility of a new and more respectable life); and rebirth (he becomes a new person in the sense of having the initiative to become successful). At each of these stages, Ragged Dick’s attire is symbolic of materialism in the world, social status, and false appearances, among other concepts. In spite of Ragged Dick’s low status, however, the narrator says more than once that the bootblack has an open, honest face and would never stoop to the level of stealing or defrauding somebody. Clearly, Ragged Dick is meant to be seen as a diamond in the rough who just needs a little polishing to shine.

At the beginning of the novel, Alger describes Ragged Dick as a street urchin who not only seems content with his lot in life (including his very tattered

attire), but also makes no attempt to improve himself in any way. His appearance is described as being “rather peculiar”: “His pants were torn in several places, and... two sizes larger than himself. He wore a [nearly buttonless] vest...a shirt which looked as if it had been worn a month. To complete his costume he wore a coat too long for him” (4). In addition, Ragged Dick never takes the time to wash the dirt off his body: “He had no particular dislike to dirt, and did not think it necessary to remove several dark streaks on his face and hands” (4). In one incident a well-dressed gentleman points out the flaws in Ragged Dick’s attire, for example noting the large tear in the bootblack’s coat. Instead of feeling embarrassed by the man’s criticism, Ragged Dick deflects it with humor and wit. Further evidence that Ragged Dick is either content with his life or resolved to it is the fact that he has no desire to save money, the narrator points out that because of his hard work, the bootblack actually earns enough money to live fairly decently. But Ragged Dick’s outlook can be described as “carpe diem”; he spends every penny that he earns on entertainment, cigars, or quite generously, treating less fortunate friends to meals. This kind of behavior seems to reflect on his lack of motivation to change his social status for the better and implies that he sees his present condition as a permanent one. Like so many other impoverished and orphaned children of his post-Civil War era, Ragged Dick’s only concern is survival on a day-to-day basis; he does not have the luxury of worrying about cleanliness or attractive clothing. Clearly the bootblack is in the “status quo” stage here with no desire to change either his clothing or his lifestyle.

Because of his lifestyle and clothing choices, Ragged Dick is subjected to various incidents involving bias and prejudice. Ironically, although the bootblack occasionally earns enough money to be able to eat at a fancier restaurant, his unsavory appearance prevents him from enjoying better food and better company: “ Neither the coffee nor the steak were as good as can be bought at Delmonico’s; but then it is very doubtful whether, in the present state of his wardrobe, Dick would have been received at that aristocratic restaurant, even if his means had admitted of paying the high prices there charged” (9-10). In addition, strangers whom he encounters on street and in business establishments make biased assumptions about Ragged Dick’s character and honesty based on his outward appearance. For example, in one instance, Ragged Dick has polished a gentleman’s shoes and the gentleman has asked for change for a bill that he pays the bootblack with. The bootblack goes into a nearby store and asks for change. The clerk attempts to cheat Ragged Dick by saying that the bill is counterfeit and seems to think he can get away with it because of the bootblack’s poor appearance: ““ Clear out of this shop, you young vagabond”” (15). Ragged Dick strongly protests and says the money belongs to a gentleman whose shoes he has just polished. This seems to alarm the clerk because of the difference in the social status between a ragged bootblack and well-to-do gentleman: “ He [the clerk] fancied that he could browbeat a ragged bootblack, but with a gentleman he saw that it would be a different manner” (16). Clearly Ragged Dick’s slovenly appearance causes others to prejudge him as either untrustworthy or foolish.

Ragged Dick is resourceful and always on alert to find ways to make money. For this reason, when he overhears a conversation on the street by Mr. Whitney and his nephew Frank, he offers his services as a city guide for Frank. Understandably, both men are a little wary about Ragged Dick because of his appearance. However, Mr. Whitney makes an important observation and decision by looking past the bootblack's threadbare clothing: "' He isn't exactly the sort of guide I would have picked out for you. Still he looks honest. He has an open face, and I think can be depended upon'" (20). Frank does not share his uncle's confidence at first, and is embarrassed by the poor figure the bootblack presents: "' I wish he wasn't so ragged and dirty,' said Frank, who felt a little shy about being seen with such a companion" (20). Ragged Dick's epiphany begins when he is convinced to wash up and change into a presentable suit of clothes that they give him. The change is so dramatic that the bootblack feels like Cinderella when she is changed into a fairy princess. In fact the change is somewhat theatrical, because almost like magic, Ragged Dick is no longer ragged but is suddenly transformed into another role as " the gentleman." He can't help feeling pleased and happy at the new treatment he receives from total strangers who speak respectfully to him and welcome him into establishments where he would have been previously unwelcome. Interestingly, even after he changes into presentable clothing, he does not quite understand that his old filthy handkerchief should also be discarded. Frank appears to be very concerned with outward appearance, recoils from the rag that Dick has pulled from his pocket, and convinces Dick to exchange it for a clean one. Alger is demonstrating the need for Dick to reject all of his old articles of clothing so that he can reinvent himself. At one point, Ragged

Dick throws his old dingy hat to the ground where it is promptly picked up by another poor boy, perhaps symbolizing that Ragged Dick has cast away his past. When he gets a new hat and completely transforms his outward appearance, the respectful way in which others treat him causes him to have an awakening to the fact that he wants this new improved life.

It is worth noting that Alger gives us reasons to admire Ragged Dick both when he is dressed shabbily and when he is transformed by his new clothing. It is mentioned more than once that Ragged Dick is extremely honest and that he is proud of being honest. We also see his generosity as he treats less successful bootblacks to food and drink. Additionally, we can admire his cheerfulness, optimism, and strong work ethic. Clearly, had he been born into better circumstances, he would have been respected by anybody who met him. However, his outward appearance presents an obstacle to that. On the other hand, when he is better dressed and escorting his new friend Frank through the city, we see that he is very street smart. While Frank is naive and easy fooled by the con men they encounter on the streets and in the shops, Ragged Dick is not naive and never falls for their tricks. We can admire his clever mind in the way that he turns the tables on these con men and beats them at their own game. The motif of clothing is seen again in the section of the novel in which the boys are walking down Chatham Street. Frank is impressed by the seemingly incredible bargains that he sees in the clothing stores and is not aware that unscrupulous shopkeepers are trying to cheat unsuspecting customers into buying their wares. Ragged Dick is well aware of these scams and steers his friend Frank away from them. This passage is interesting because it shows that appearance is deceiving. Frank

is the well-dressed gentleman that the public would expect to be wise and cautious, while the bootblack in his threadbare attire would be expected to be less educated about ways of the world. We see here that clothes are a superficial addition to a person's image and that one must go below the surface of clothing to know the real person beneath.

Ragged Dick experiences an epiphany almost immediately after he changes into the nicer clothing that Frank gives him. First of all the bootblack is delighted at how good he feels, mentally and physically to have a clean body and fresh clean clothes. This moment is symbolic because he is ready to throw away his old clothes and old life and change his future. The epiphany he experiences includes more than just his outward appearance. Ragged Dick wants to improve his mind as well and has a sudden yearning for education and reading. Fortunately he has good mentors (Mr. Whitney and Frank) who see his potential and encourage him to improve himself. This is the turning point in the story and is also symbolized by Ragged Dick's disgust when he looks at his old dirty attire: " But now, as he surveyed the ragged and dirty coat and the patched pants, Dick felt ashamed of them. He was unwilling to appear in the streets with them" (82). Where previously he had been content with his bootblackening job, he now longs for something bigger and better to do. He says, "' I really wish I could get somethin' else to do,' said Dick, soberly. ' I'd like to be a office boy, and learn business, and grow up respectable'" (37). At this point he is equating success with money, but his friend Frank guides him and helps him understand that what really matters is to earn respect: "' If you'll try to be somebody, and grow up into a respectable member of society, you will. You may not become rich, -it isn't

everybody that becomes rich, you know—but you can obtain a good position, and be respected” (39-40). Similarly, Mr. Whitney offers his advice about what the bootblack should focus on as a means of improving his life and status: education. He encourages the bootblack to save his money and buy books with it. As part of his epiphany, Ragged Dick recognizes how uneducated he really is and makes this strong statement: ““ I mean to turn over a new leaf ...I’m willin’ to work hard...I never thought how awful ignorant I was till now” (52). This is probably the most important part of the novel because Ragged Dick awakens to the desire to take a new path in his life and to basically become a new person outside and inside.

While the bootblack is undergoing changes in his appearance and life, people who encounter him have different reactions. Strangers react positively and assume from his genteel clothing and his good looks that he must be a gentleman’s son; he is treated accordingly with respect and trust. On the other hand, a fellow bootblack acquaintance is offended and threatened by Ragged Dick’s new persona. Micky Maguire taunts Ragged Dick about his new clothing, accuses him of “ putting on airs” and becomes so upset that he tries to fight him. This scene seems to represent Alger’s view that underprivileged people such as Micky feel inferior and resentful towards those who have social power over them. When a policeman notices the quarrel and tries to stop it, Micky is the automatic culprit in his eyes because the well-dressed Ragged Dick was clearly not someone who would stoop to street fighting.

Ragged Dick’s rebirth is his transformation into a new and improved character. His increasing desire to elevate himself mentally and intellectually

is reflected in the pride he takes in his clean and respectable appearance. Some of the ways that the bootblack works to rise in society's higher class include: he rejects sleeping in a box like he used to do and instead pays for lodgings; he opens his first bank account (previously he could never save to put any money into a bank); he is tutored at Sunday school by Mr. Greyson who teaches him by having him read the bible; he receives additional tutoring from another bootblack named Henry Fosdick who knows how to read and write (Ragged Dick pays him for his services); and he is finally able to write his first letter to Frank after many months of study. Ragged Dick's golden opportunity and the real moment of his rebirth occurs when Mr. Rockwell gives him a new set of clothing and a clerk position in his business after the bootblack saves Mr. Rockwell's son from drowning. It is important to note that there are two times when Ragged Dick receives new clothes from someone in the story, and those new clothes are given as a reward for a good deed. The first set of new clothes simply awakens Ragged Dick to the fact that, fair or not, people judge others by their appearance. The second set of clothes signify a real forward step out of the poverty and ignorance that Ragged Dick has known all of his life. The respectable clothing allows the bootblack to be judged by who he is because there is no distraction caused by ill-kempt attire. In other words, in a sense Ragged Dick is reborn as "Richard Hunter," his given name but one that he has never felt able to use before.

Alger's novel is not only a coming of age novel showing one young man's rise from poverty to success based on his own hard work and moral values; it is also a commentary on society and the way that people tend to "judge a

book by its cover,” making judgments about others based on appearance only. The change in Ragged Dick’s outward appearance provides opportunities for improvement that would have never been offered to him in his previous threadbare outfit. However, the bootblack himself recognizes the profound change in his life and prospects: “ Dick felt in very good spirits. He seemed to be emerging from the world in which he had hitherto lived, into a new atmosphere of respectability, and the change seemed very pleasant to him” (96). In *Ragged Dick or, Street Life in New York with the Boot Blacks*, Horatio Alger Jr. effectively utilizes the symbol of clothing to represent the three stages in Ragged Dick’s life: status quo, epiphany, and rebirth. Ragged Dick is transformed from an underdog in the lowest rungs of society to a promising young man with a bright future ahead of him. This novel offers hope and inspiration to young readers and emphasizes the importance of education and hard work. It epitomizes the classic American Dream motif in which people can be successful with hard work and perseverance to achieve the life they dream of.